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"Become the Beast" — Karliene

"One Way Or Another" — "Until the Ribbon Breaks"

"Lost" — Jeremy Ravine

"Beast" — 8 Graves

"Shed My Skin" — Within Temptation

"Underneath" — Adam Lambert

"Kamikaze" — Night Argent

"Betrayal" — Syd Duran

"Animal" — Epic Trailer, J2, Keeley Bumford

"Ether Garden" — Henry Jamison

"In the Roses" — Christian Reindl, Henri Bardot

"Just This Once" — MathematicPony

"Passion Colors Everything" — Poets of the Fall

**Playlist** 





This book is dedicated to those who read the trigger/content warnings

and choose to lay the book aside.

Safe travels, my lovelies. I have other books you'd probably like better than this one.

This book is also dedicated to the people who read the warnings and say,

"Fuck yeah."

Buckle up, darlings.



monster fucking
(she fucks them both but chooses one)
slavery of fantasy characters
self-harm, dubious consent
suicide ideation
violence, gore
voyeurism, abuse



I didn't know my father had sold me until rough hands gripped my arms, dragging me from my bed. Disoriented, I went along, snatching a shawl from the chair—I thought perhaps the cottage was on fire and they were trying to save me. A laughable mistake, really.

When they hustled me through the front room, past my father and my two older sisters, then—oh, then—I knew that my father's debts and my sisters' greed for every new fashion had finally torn us all apart, as I'd feared they would.

I could only imagine what my family saw in me as I was dragged past them. Not a girl of their own blood—no, I represented cold hard coin, to be traded for weeks of fine dining, or pretty dresses for days, or a night at the dice tables.

Lassa dabbed at her eyes delicately with a lace-trimmed handkerchief, and Lettie primmed up her mouth as if she smelled something foul.

My father didn't look at me at all. He stirred the coins in his palm with a finger, touching each one lightly, as a mother might touch a baby's cheek.

And then I was past them, out the front door, the soles of my bare feet skidding against the stone steps as the men hauled me along. I wasn't even fighting. They didn't need to be so rough. Perhaps they enjoyed mauling the women they took.

The cold bit into my skin as they dragged me toward a covered cart with bars across its windows. I'd seen it before, on its way to the slave markets in the city. Usually there were a couple pairs of hands wrapped around the bars, frantic eyes peering between them.

Today the cart was empty.

Today I would be the frantic eyes, the pair of hands gripping the bars.

One of the men opened the cart door, and another lifted me bodily and shoved me into the dark, sour-smelling interior. He squeezed a handful of my rear as I clambered inside, and gave it a sound smack.

"Skinny, but the flesh that's there is good," he said. "And that golden hair of hers will fetch a good price."

"Her mouth though." Another man whistled. "I know where I'd like to put those juicy red lips."

Their laughter was abruptly muffled by the slamming of the cart door. I heard the scrape of a chain, the snap of a lock.

After some shuffling and shouts, the men took their places on the outside of the cart, and it began to rattle and grind along the road.

I drew my shawl around my shoulders, but between the cold and my shock, I could not stop shaking.

Sold. Sold to slavers. Sold by my own family.

The people who bought young women like me weren't looking for someone to keep the books or manage the household. I had no illusions about what awaited me.

My winter nightdress provided decent coverage. Long-sleeved and loose-necked, it billowed around my legs and reached down to my ankles. But would they even allow me to keep it on? More likely they'd dress me in something scanty, to show off my shape. At worst, they'd strut me onto the auction block naked.

Surely there must be a way to escape this cart, to give those men the slip. I gritted my teeth and fumbled around in the darkness with trembling fingers, but all I found was a few bits of straw, a lock of hair, and a button. I tested the seams and corners of the cart, from floor to roof. All of it was nauseatingly solid. Inescapable.

Despair weighed my bones as I sank back onto the bench.

There was nothing to be done. I had only to await my fate.

Pieces of leather had been tacked over the cart windows from the inside. The ridges of tacks ran along the top edges of the leather, leaving the bottom free so the cart's passengers could lift the flaps and look out. For a time I struggled to work a couple of the tacks loose, thinking to use one as a weapon, but I only succeeded in

breaking three of my nails down to the quick. Besides, it was an absurd endeavor. A girl of twenty, armed with a tiny tack against three able-bodied men?

It would be foolish to antagonize them anyway. They might decide to sample the goods before taking me to market, and I did not fancy servicing three smelly louts out here in the bitter winter forest.

I huddled into the corner of the cart, miserably nursing my three damaged fingers. We traveled for so long that I dozed off without meaning to—I only realized I had slept when I was woken by a savage howl ripping across the frozen landscape. I had heard such howls before, loudest on the day my mother died.

My captors' reaction to the howl was instant and panicked—the manic fear of those who know they are doomed.

"Welaway! It's a welaway! Take up arms and be ready! Faster, drive faster!"

The welaway were not regular wolves. They did not limit their hunting hours to the darkness, nor did they fear fire, or the weapons of man. They were immense demon wolves made of darkness and fangs. Some of them were deformed, with second mouths gaping in their flanks or their backs. Others had twin heads, or three tails, or six legs. The welaway that killed my mother had a coat of black streaked with poisonous green, and eight yellow eyes spattered across its skull—or so I was told by the trapper who witnessed her demise from a distance.

The welaways' usual haunt was the northern snowscape, where they could run free in the wildlands and pick off unwary beasts and humans from the outlying villages. They did not usually linger near the road to the city.

The cart jerked forward, rattling faster. From what I'd been able to discern by sound, there were two men on the cart's front seat, and one on a small seat at the rear. They had all fallen silent, each one listening with raw dread for any other hints of the welaway.

Another howl shattered the glass-thin silence. More howls echoed from this side and that. We were being surrounded, corralled, blocked in.

A thump of enormous paws, and then a snarl from the road ahead, and the entire cart jerked sharply in time to the panicked whinnies of the two cart-horses.

A man's scream followed—I didn't know if he tumbled from the cart or was ripped off, but I could hear his screams fading into the distance as the cart careened along the road. I braced myself in the corner, legs locked in place against the bench opposite me. The cart bounced, then slammed down, and my teeth snapped together so hard I thought they might break.

Faster and faster we raced, pursued by savage howls. The cart lurched around a corner—careened onto its two left wheels for a hideous moment of suspension—then smashed onto its side in a cacophony of crunching wood and squealing metal and terrified horse screams.

My entire left side collided hard with the wood. I touched my shoulder, hip, and leg quickly—no broken bones, but I'd surely have bruises blooming in those places for weeks.

I could hear a harsh, hungry panting sound outside the cart, punctuated by shrieks of agony, the ripping of flesh, and the cracking of bone. The welaways were eating the slavers.

No time to be grateful, for I would surely be next. Should I stay here in the cart and hope they would pass me by, or should I wriggle out and run while they were dining on the men and the horses?

The welaways could smell prey from miles away. And they could rip through wooden walls with their massive jaws. The cart would offer no protection.

"You're dead either way, Lyrical," I hissed at myself under my breath. "Just go. Go!"

The corner of the cart had shattered where it impacted a tree trunk. There was a narrow gap where someone slim and underfed like me might slip through. For once I blessed the hunger that had gnawed my belly through one too many nights.

I slithered out of the hole, ripping my nightdress from ankle to thigh on one of the jagged shards of wood. I didn't look back to see the source of the sloppy gulps and wet chewing that I could hear behind me. I clawed my way desperately forward through the snow, stumbling to my feet and starting to run.

I tripped over my nightdress, falling forward and slamming into the forest floor. A poky branch jabbed my cheekbone a mere finger's-breadth from my eye. Whimpering internally at the pain of the fall, I staggered up again, scrunching my nightdress in both hands.

I ran, my bare bruised feet flying across rocks, roots, fallen trees and the crunchy litter of the cold woodland.

For minutes that felt like unending days I ran, my ears painfully attuned to any sounds of pursuit.

Had I done the impossible? Survived a welaway attack?

But nobody ever survived.

Moments later I heard the slavering whine and rapid gallop of paws behind me, and I knew I was dead.

I risked one glance. One single glance over my shoulder at the welaway chasing me.

The monster looked as if a giant rat king had mated with a huge wolf. Wrinkly patches of pink skin sagged between its bristling ridges of fur. It was about my size, small as welaways go—probably a runt that had been shoved aside and denied part of the general feast. And so it had come after me. I was the easy prey, the foolish flesh scampering into the forest.

The welaway whined again, desperate with eagerness, wild at its own luck in finding me, a juicy morsel alone and defenseless.

The monster's skinny wrinkled legs looked oddly jointed and clumsy, so I chose the most troublesome route for my flight—across heaving roots, under low-hanging branches, and over lumpy logs. I heard a squeal and a thump as the welaway tripped up, and I smiled, bloody teeth bared to the forest. A grimace of defiance.

You haven't got me yet.

One more look backward—I had gained some ground, but it was still racing in pursuit—

I collided full-speed into something hard and broad and unyielding. I rebounded from the obstacle and crashed onto my back, knocked flat. The breath fled my lungs, and pain washed through me, waves of it.

Dizzily I tried to focus on the thing I had run into. The shadows and mist made it difficult to see clearly. The fog had come up suddenly, swathing the crooked forest. But when I squinted, I could make out a stone wall, high and broad.

A wall, out here in the forest where no one dared to live.

If I could get over the wall, or around it—if I could make my stupid legs *move*, if I could pump air into my lungs and *get up*—

The welaway howled, shrill and shaky with triumph, its bandy legs tossing up leaves as it plunged toward me.

Wrenching myself upright, I limped along the wall as fast as I could. No toe holds or finger holds—not that I could climb them if there were, with my body battered like this.

My fingers met a ridge—a corner—and I ducked around that corner just as the welaway charged. Its claws raked across my back, but even as I screamed, I heard the satisfying crack of its skull against the stone. It staggered, squealing, and I took fresh energy from the sound, hobbling faster along the new line of the wall, dragging bloodied fingers across the stones.

The fog swirled thicker, and I stumbled blind until my hand slipped into emptiness. I reached farther, and my fingertips brushed something round and cold—a bar. The bar of a gate.

Gripping the gate with both hands, sobbing, I jerked it back and forth with all my might. My panicked brain could barely grasp how to open it properly, but I made myself take a second to breathe, and to examine it. It was only latched, not locked.

Scrabbling at the icy metal, I managed to dislodge the latch.

I stepped through.

And I slammed the gate shut just as the welaway, with its bloodied rat-like skull, collided with the bars.

I jumped back, not daring to trust the sturdiness of this unknown gate. Time to run again.

Deeper I fled into the unknown wilderness beyond the gate. Dark hedges with dense, prickly leaves rose on either side of me, towering so high they left only a sliver of gray sky above.

I took one turn, and another. A right, then a left, then another left, maybe a right again? My toes were numb with cold, and my feet left bloody smears on the pebbled turf. My nightdress was rags by now —ripped to my thigh in two places, hanging off my left shoulder, and torn wide at the back.

Whoever built a hedge maze in the middle of the forest must have a house somewhere, or at least a garden shed I could use for shelter. The hedges appeared neatly clipped, although I could not for the life of me figure out how anyone could trim such an expanse of foliage. Perhaps the owner of the house was a sorcerer. It would explain why he or she was not afraid to live out here in the wild, so far from the security of a town or a city.

After following one long hedge passage for several minutes, I stepped out into a courtyard paved with smooth white stones.

The courtyard felt warmer than the hedge maze. Instead of the gray half-light of the forest, the air glimmered golden, though I could not see the sun.

In the center of that golden haze of light and swelling warmth stood a cluster of rosebushes, each one bearing several blooms so plump and richly colored that I stepped closer.

Their fragrance was like nothing I'd ever experienced—winsome, honeyed, and luxurious.

My heart throbbed, and my fingers twitched at my sides. My entire body and mind were suddenly suffused with the aching desire to touch those roses, to own one, to bury my nose in the center of a whorl of fragrant petals.

Blinking away the golden motes of dust, I reached for a rose.

But I hesitated. These roses did not belong to me, and their presence here whispered of sorcery.

The blooms were so lusciously beautiful, though, blood-red with a hint of royal purple at the curling edges of their velvety petals. At least the petals *looked* like velvet. One would have to touch them to be sure

A touch could not hurt. A touch would harm no one, and break no unwritten law of respect for my host, whoever that might be.

I leaned in, cupping one of the most voluptuous roses in my palm, letting the stem slip between my fingers. It was as soft as I'd imagined. Closer I bent, inhaling its dizzying fragrance, my cheek grazing the frills of its petals.

Desire for the rose twisted, tight and savage, in my heart. I had been through hell on this day, and against all odds, I had escaped my

captors and the demons. I deserved one beautiful rose as my prize for surviving.

My fingers slid lower on the stem, and though a thorn tore the pad of one finger, I did not care. My grip tightened, and with a single snap, I broke the rose's tether to the bush.

It was mine, entirely mine.

Mine to cradle, and caress, and crush.

I shook my head, blinking. That last thought had not come from me. At least, I didn't think it had. It was almost as if another voice had murmured in my mind. A dark voice.

A male voice.

Exhaustion and injury were catching up with me, disturbing my sanity. I must find shelter.

I left the courtyard by a new path, opposite the one I by which I entered. When I began to take a right turn, the rose pulsed softly in my hand, like a heartbeat. Or perhaps like a warning.

Definitely an enchanted rose, in an enchanted garden owned by a sorcerer. I must be on my guard. I must not slip under the thrall of any dastardly magic-wielder.

There were few sorcerers in the kingdom nowadays, but those who did exist were eccentric at best and murderous at worst. Just last year, the king had to send in troops to take down a sorceress who was entrapping virgin girls and boys and bathing in their blood to keep herself young.

I shuddered at the thought. Goddess forbid I had walked into the lair of one of some evil, murderous sorceress.

Over the past few years, as things became more wretched at home, I'd wished for magic of my own. Magic to ease my father's desperate love for the thrill of the dice. Magic to soften my sisters' craving for beautiful things. Magic to bring my father the excitement he wanted in some healthier way, and to fill the emptiness in my sisters' hearts with strong ambitions and prosperous homes.

Between the garden, the house, the mending and laundering work I took in, and the effort to keep up with my studies, I had scarcely had time to think of myself, or what magic might do for me. But now, every time the rose pulsed in my hands, signaling a wrong turn,

or when it released a soft sigh of glittery fragrance to indicate the correct path, I thought of how I might put such magic to use.

I would do far more than craft magical guide-flowers. I would drive the welaways out of the land. I'd kill them all, if I could. I'd improve the roads and buildings of the smaller villages, the ones that the district managers always overlooked.

I'd put a stop to the slave trade and punish all those who profited from it. I'd give the holdings and funds of the slave traders to former slaves, so they could build new lives.

I could do so much with a little bit of magic.

The rose pulsed again, and I turned in a new direction. It released another puff of sweet-scented glitter to reward me. I inhaled deeply, and the pleasure of the fragrance spiraled inside me, traveling low through my belly, curling soft in my secret places.

Experimentally, I sniffed the rose again. The tingle between my legs grew stronger, so deliciously powerful that I had to pause and press my thighs together.

I felt suddenly, unaccountably tempted to touch myself, to slip my fingers between my legs and indulge the craving that woke inside me.

A foolish impulse, completely wrong for the situation in which I found myself.

Shaking my head, I resisted the urge and pushed forward.

With my eyes fixed on the rose, I almost missed the dark form standing in an alcove within the hedge. I caught its shape out of the corner of my eye, and my entire body jumped with shock.

Nerves buzzing with fear, I took a second look. The dim light didn't illuminate the alcove, so I couldn't see the figure well. It stood solid and black, so motionless it must be a statue.

A statue, yes—because no real living thing had this strange blend of body parts, both animal and human. Legs shaggy with fur, ending in a bull's massive hooves. A man's muscled stomach and chest.

Arms branched from the torso, equally muscled, darkening into wolflike paws outfitted with curving nails. And finally, there was a bull's head, thick with a matted mane that moved in the whisper of wind.

Yes, the tendrils of coarse hair along the bull's cheek and snout were *moving*. And above the snout glittered a pair of ebony eyes.

When my gaze met those dark eyes, a jolt passed through me, rattling me to my very bones. My lungs seized up, refusing to draw in air. I eased backward one step, then another.

The eyes remained fixed on me.

It must be some kind of lifelike magical statue, perhaps a monster frozen in place by the sorcerer who lived here. That was the only sensible explanation.

But why did those black eyes seem so warmly, savagely alive?

I could not think about it. I must keep moving, keep walking, quietly, quickly.

I hurried along the row, sensing more strongly than ever how trapped I was, encircled by hedges like a fish in a barrel.

A muffled grunt from behind me nearly stopped my heart. The back of my neck prickled with dreadful anticipation.

A snorting snuffle, and then a growl, guttural and deep.

Forgetting my caution, I broke and ran.

I took turn after turn, careless and fear-stricken, while tears burned in my eyes and sobs hitched in my chest. Still I clutched the rose's stem in my sweating palm, refusing to let it go.

Hooves thumped the ground behind me—a halting, two-legged half-gallop.

The violence of the cart crash and the chase afterward had left me less able to flee. My left ribs twinged harshly, and my left leg shot bolts of pain from ankle to hip. Pain tweaked the skin of my back where I'd been clawed.

I had already escaped one monster—could I outrun another? It was too much to hope for.

Each breath raked through my burning lungs, each pounding step tore through my muscles and bones with fresh agony.

I must give up. I could not keep running—I must fall prostrate on the grassy path and be trampled.

But I looked up. Just for a moment.

Beyond the hedges I saw stonework and turrets and pinnacles, archways and balconies and windows of leaded glass.

A castle.

Shelter. Safety.

Oddly enough, I hadn't felt cold since I picked the rose. But now that relief was in sight, all the aches and pains of my battered body cried out again full-force. And my stomach snarled with hunger, savage as any welaway of the wild.

I glanced behind me, down the long row I had just traversed, and I could see no sign of the bull-beast.

Would the sorcerer of this castle grant me shelter? Would he—or she—ask something of me in payment? At this juncture I was ready to promise almost anything in exchange. Not that I had much to offer. I was already in debt for the plucking of the rose.

Whatever lay ahead could not be any worse than the fate I would have faced on the auction block.

As I approached the entrance, my bare feet imprinted each step of the castle with a scarlet mark. Still cupping the rose in my left hand, I raised my right fist and thumped on the door. The solid oak drank the sound, so I pounded again.

With the clank of a latch and the shriek of massive hinges, the door opened.



The girl smelled like sweat and fear and my accursed brother's damned roses.

I stood in the hollow of the hedge while she stared right at me, curiosity and terror mingling in her eyes. My gaze traveled the sweep of her neck, the line of her bare shoulder. She had been terribly beaten, purple bruises staining her skin, scarlet scrapes thatched along her arms. Three of the fingernails on one hand were crusted with blood, and fresh blood speckled the ground wherever she stepped. She moved haltingly, as if her left side and left leg pained her. When she turned tail and ran, I saw scratches across her back. Claw marks.

But her wounded feet were as light as a doe's.

I gave chase, half longing to catch her and keep her in the maze with me—half hoping she'd outdistance me so she would enter the castle and be my brother's problem.

When she turned the corner and ran down the path to the castle door, I broke off my pursuit. If only I dared to creep closer, to see her face when she saw Everston's form and realized it was no better than mine.

I could have tried to call out to her. But what would be the use? What would I say? "Welcome to this accursed place. You have plucked one of my brother's foul fey roses, and once you enter that castle you may not leave until he permits it."

If he had not spelled those rosebushes to keep me away, I'd have torn up the whole mess of them ages ago. Curse him and his magic.

I peered around the corner of the hedgerow, watching as the enchanted castle door swung wide to admit the girl. An unaccountable sadness settled over me as she disappeared inside.

I never had a chance with any of the girls who had wandered into this wretched place over the last ninety-nine years. There had been a mere dozen or so. Not a fair chance at love for either Everston or me. And he chose to make it even more unfair, planting charmed roses that would lead the girls straight to him, and away from me.

None of the girls had ever emerged from that dreadful door.

I champed my jaws, threw back my head, and loosed a nasal bellow that soared out of the maze and across the tops of the hedges, reverberating unnaturally against the stones of the castle. Everston would hear it, and he would know that I was still here, still angry—but not hopeful anymore. No, my hope had shriveled up like the discarded petal of a rose.

I wandered away from the main part of the maze, loping through archways and past neatly trimmed bushes in the shapes of chessmen. A boxwood knight hailed me with a leafy arm, and the pawns rustled with anticipation, but I was in no mood for a game.

The fountain rose higher and sparkled as I passed—Elinor was always a showoff, back when she was human, before the curse turned her into a fountain. I leaned over to drink from one of the glittering arches of water, and when I straightened again they danced, crossing each other and flinging out diamond spray.

My private garden lay at the far corner of the castle grounds, where my brother's magical influence was thin at best. There I had nurtured the plants that were already present when the curse was first cast, and after ninety-nine years of fastidious care, the garden beds remained a delight to the eye and to the stomach.

I had to tend them carefully of course, because of the paws. At first I'd despaired of ever being able to garden properly with my bearlike appendages. But if I didn't eat plenty of fresh vegetables and greens, the monstrous part of me would begin to hunger for flesh, raw and red, ripping away from slick bone.

So I had learned how to control my claws, and how to live on copious servings of produce, along with whatever food my brother deigned to conjure for me. I planted my paws on the rocky border of one of the lettuce beds and ripped out a jawful of damp green leaves. Between savage chews I wondered what Everston might be doing with the girl right now. Had he introduced himself yet? What parts of the truth would he tell her? How charming would he try to be?

Whatever he did with the girls, it always failed in the end. I had seen him kissing them a few times, through the windows. I'd watched him rutting one of them on the floor of a high balcony of the castle, her red hair spilling between the columns of the balustrade. Her long locks swung wildly with each of his thrusts, and her delirious exhales echoed across the garden. When she came, she shrilled her bliss to high heaven.

I had ached for a closer look at her body. It had been so long since I'd seen a woman naked, so long since I'd touched anyone, or spoken to anyone. But Everston's magic was a wall around the castle, barring me from the doors. If he saw me peeping through a window, he'd send a stinging lash of power my way. So all I got were distant glimpses.

Those glimpses and sounds had been enough to let me know what went on inside the castle. I knew Everston had achieved some level of intimacy with the women. But his strategies never yielded the ideal outcome—true love, and our release from these forms and this prison.

And where was *she* in all this—the Faerie who had cursed us, the one on whom we'd played such a wicked prank nearly a century ago? What could she have been doing all this time? Wandering the world, looking for more careless men to punish?

Still chewing my mouthful of lettuce, I tromped to my ivy-draped cottage and swept the vines away from the door, ducking low so my horns would not strike the lintel. I flung myself onto a pile of animal hides in the corner—my makeshift bed. For a beast like me, it was rather like a human sleeping upon the skins of other humans. But I had no choice. It was either that or straw, which was like sleeping atop a pile of food.

I had tried blankets once, but they wore out quickly thanks to my rough hide, and without the preservative magic my brother used on the castle, the fabric quickly moldered and crumbled away. Staring up at the thick beams of the ceiling, I pondered it again—the wretched error in judgment that secured this terrible fate for my twin and I.

By now I could admit that what we had done was disgusting. We were both drunk out of our minds, weary of our usual lascivious pastimes, eager to try something more daring, more devilish.

The whole thing was Everston's idea. I'd like to think I'd have said "no," if I hadn't been tipping back tankards of Master Harlim's best brew all night.

Still, as revolting as the joke was, did it truly merit such permanent punishment? Did the Faerie have no mercy in her heart? Did she not believe people could change?

I had suffered nearly a hundred years within these walls. Almost a century shut in from the world, and shut out of the castle.

If I had possessed magic, my fate might have been different. Everston would not have been able to keep me out of our home. He would not have been able to keep the girls all to himself, leaving me with no hope of escape.

I rose from the bed of skins, roaring in an agony of rage and pain. Despair inflated inside me, swelling bigger until I thought I might burst from its pressure. A sob jerked from my lungs as I bowed over, clutching my stomach with my wolf's claws. If I had the courage, I would rip out my own entrails and finish it. But I knew from terrible experience that any attempt to kill myself would only result in long, painful healing. The curse would not allow me to die, not yet.

Everston and I were immortal.

With no hope.

And no end.



My fingers tightened on the golden ball in my hands. Within its swirling depths, I could see the girl plucking the rose. She looked so charmingly tentative and sweet—and savagely determined to live, judging by the marks on her flesh. Such sweet kissable bruises and traceable cuts. I would touch them all, and maybe inflict a few marks of my own upon her skin, because she was mine.

Mine to seize and savor. Mine to cradle, and caress, and crush.

As she walked, her long legs flashed through the ripped skirts of her nightdress. Once, while she strode through the garden, the material became twisted between her thighs and she had to pull it free. The cant of her hips as she walked, the lush fall of her lashes as she inhaled the rose's scent, and the decadent waves of her golden hair—it was too much. My body inflamed with lust.

The last girl had arrived a year ago, and she had only lasted a few weeks—not nearly long enough to sate me.

I looked down at myself. Beneath the paneled muscles of my chest and stomach, my erection stood out, massive and obvious, a thick blue cock with a glossy mushroom-shaped head. Its shaft was clad in tiny scales that felt smooth to the touch. An inhuman piece of equipment, to be sure, but one well-suited to pleasing women.

I needed to put on clothing; I usually went about naked unless I had a house guest.

Perhaps I should service myself, to tame my body's urgency. It usually took a while before the girls succumbed and let me lie with them.

Each one eventually did, out of boredom, animal lust, spite, fascination—all possible motivations by turns, except the one that I craved—love. None of them ever loved me, either before the act or afterward.

My father had taught me that sexual congress was a precursor to love; that love often resulted from prolonged intimate connection with the same partner. Love could be rutted into being. And so I tried to force that emotion into the girls by pleasuring them so thoroughly that they lay limp and sweating and spent on their beds. I had never brought them to my own bed. I never allowed anyone in my room. Only the one who loved me would be allowed to breach that sacred space.

I had endured so much frustration, over and over—looking eagerly into a girl's face after bringing her to a third or fourth climax, aching for the words that would set me free—only to have her wince and turn away at the sight of my inhuman features. Sometimes they had looked so disgusted with me and with themselves that I slunk away, down to the dungeons, to take out my frustration by battering myself against cell walls and beating my back with rusty chains.

I snarled at the memories. Then I lifted the golden ball, careful not to scratch the surface with my claws.

Murmuring a spell, I breathed on the globe, infusing the magic rose with an aphrodisiac for the girl. She inhaled seconds later, her eyes closing again and her lips parting. Her pale skin flushed, and she nibbled her lower lip with her white teeth. Her free hand wandered across her stomach, and I willed it to travel down, between her legs—

But then she shook herself a little and marched on, full of purpose.

I groaned, tight with pent-up need, and replaced the globe on its stand, staring at her as she walked, clad in rags, her unfettered breasts bouncing under the fabric of her nightgown. With another whispered spell, I enhanced my view of her chest, until I could make out the beads of her nipples pressing urgently against the cloth.

My cock swelled harder.

I wound my serpentine tail around my length, forming a tunnel I could thrust into. The girls I pleasured enjoyed this tail of mine, and

it serviced my own needs well too, whether I desired a hole to fuck or a thick length pressing into my ass.

I thrust into the coils of my tail, working myself toward the peak, drinking in the sight of those breasts. Then I shifted my view to center on the girl's mouth—a rosy bud perfect for closing around my shaft, sucking me dry, drinking me down—

I shouted aloud, spattering the rug with my release, relishing the delicious thrill circling through my belly and legs.

Sinking to the floor, I lay there awhile. I could rest a moment, secure in the knowledge that the girl would find her way to me.

When finally I drew myself upright again, the girl was running. Something had spooked her. Perhaps she'd caught a glimpse of Caswell's monstrous form. He often lurked within the maze, hoping to get first chance at one of the girls.

My suspicion was confirmed by a resounding roar from somewhere beyond the castle walls. Out there in the maze, my brother was venting his frustration. He had let the new guest slip by him, fool that he was—too soft to capture the girls and keep them for himself.

Caswell had always been too weak, too indecisive, putting off choices until the last moment and then regretting his inaction. In the old days, he'd been the most fun when he was drunk, when that petty conscience of his could not interfere with every salacious scheme I concocted.

But perhaps if he had not been drunk on that final night, we would not have been trapped together in this curse. Perhaps he would have hammered reason into my head instead of guffawing loudly and going along with my plan.

I wrangled loose pants onto my body and hung a heavy golden chain around my neck.

As a final touch, I draped a heavy, hooded cloak over myself, so the girl would not flee screaming at the first sight of me.

I left my chambers and descended three broad flights of steps to the first floor, arriving in the great hall just as the girl pounded on the castle door.

"Welcome, little rabbit," I murmured, "to the cave of the dragon."

And I signaled for the door to open.



When the castle door swung wide, I hesitated, peering inside. Eager as I was for shelter, rest, and food, I wasn't stupid. A place like this had to be dripping with magic; and judging by the maze and the monster within it, it wasn't the fun kind—if magic could ever be described as fun. I wasn't familiar enough with it to be sure.

My battered foot slid over the threshold, toes testing the smooth cold marble of the floor. The place had the old, dry smell of buildings that are well-kept but not much lived in—like the chapel near my village. I had been there once with my aunt before she moved away East. She worshiped the Faerie gods and goddesses—I could never remember all their names, but her favorite was Nehalennia, goddess of the sea.

As I crept into the great hall of the castle, like some frayed mouse tiptoeing into the cat's lair, I thought I might as well pray to something or other. I hadn't had the time or the mental capacity to send up any prayers before now. My brain function had been limited to *run*, *run*, and *survive* and *dodge* and *run again*.

But as I stood in the center of the hall, gazing at the soaring ceilings and the elaborate paneling and the carpeted staircase, I whispered a prayer. "Nehalennia, goddess of many waters, protect me."

I padded across the chilly floor toward a double-wide doorway framed in thick beams of rich red-brown wood.

"Is anyone here?" I called.

My voice was rough from screaming and from the cold. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Is anyone here?"

I tucked the rose behind my back, because if the first thing the owner of the house saw was their stolen property in my hands, that might predispose them to toss me out on my rear.

As I inched into the next room, the fireplace flared to life with a suddenness that horrified me. But the crackling and popping of the flames was comforting, too, and the familiar smoky scent curled around me like an old friend.

Warmth emanated from the hearth, luring me closer. With a sigh of relief, I laid my rose on a side table and sank into a wooden chair stuffed with scarlet cushions. A thick blanket hung over the back of the chair, so I tugged it across my body.

My overtired brain was growing mushy and soft and warm, too weary to do the logical thing and find the owner. *That can wait*, murmured my bones and bruises. *Rest first*.

My eyes popped open when a thunking, sloshing sound registered in my mind. I didn't know how long I had slept, but something was hopping toward me—a sort of small copper tub on legs, like a bath, but only large enough for a pair of feet.

The foot bath moved on its own with odd little bumps and hops until it reached my chair. During its progress I drew my knees up to my chin, anxious because I had never seen an inanimate object act like a living thing. It must be part of the magic of this place.

When the bath stopped, I eyed the glimmering water. Its surface was amber-dappled in the light of the fireplace, and it breathed little wisps of steam. My feet cried out for that delicious liquid comfort. Unable to resist, I uncurled my legs and slipped my toes into the water.

I could not hold back the moan of satisfaction that escaped me then. In all my years I had never felt anything so blissful. My bathwater at home had always been lukewarm and greasy, the leftovers of my sisters, and though I sometimes changed it out for clean water, I rarely had the time or energy to reheat it for myself. The luxury of water that was clean *and* hot seemed incredibly sensual and glorious.

Recklessly I plunged my feet into the bath. As the liquid closed around my ankles, I whispered, "Fuck," in a fervently thankful tone.

"Good heavens," said a voice behind my chair. "What a deliciously filthy tongue you have."

I startled, and I thought about withdrawing my feet from the bath, but it simply felt too good. I decided to keep my feet in it until the master of the house ordered otherwise. It was a male voice speaking to me, though I could not see his face thanks to the high back of the chair.

"I beg your pardon, sir," I said. "I have encountered terrible misfortunes today. First I was dragged from my bed by slavers, to be sold as payment for my father's debts. Then the slavers' cart was attacked by welaways, and I barely escaped with my life. One of them chased me through the woods, all the way to your gates. And then, in the garden maze, I was pursued by a horrible beast with the head of a bull. So you see, my lord, I have a good reason for forgetting my manners."

"That sounds like sufficient reason indeed." His voice was strangely sibilant, hissing over the "s" sound. "Are you enjoying your foot bath?"

"I—yes, thank you. Did you send it?"

"I did."

"Thank you. May I ask—who are you? And why do you stand behind the chair? May I see you, so I may thank you to your face?"

"One question first."

A question. Very well—I could handle a question. "Proceed."

"Did you pluck one of my roses?"

My gaze flew to the side table where I had left the rose.

It was gone. For all I knew it had melted into thin air, in which case I could deny his accusation without fear of being discovered. Or perhaps he himself had taken the rose while I slept, in which case he already knew the truth and was testing my veracity.

Better to err on the side of truth. If he threw me out, at least I'd had a moment to rest and soak my feet. Perhaps I could sneak back in by some side door and hide in one of the empty rooms. This place was large enough that I could probably live here for weeks and not be discovered. Surely there was a kitchen somewhere about, from which I could sneak a little food.

"In truth, sir, I must confess that I did take it," I said.

"Why did you take it?"

I bit my lip. I had not expected that question. "Because it delighted me. And it seemed to be calling to me."

"Did it not occur to you that the rose might be special? Magical, even? That perhaps its nurturer would take it amiss if you picked it?"

"Yes, sir. It did occur to me."

"And?"

"And I did not care."

A beat of terrifying silence.

Then the man behind my chair laughed, cool and lovely, with that same hissing edge. "What do they call you?"

"I am called Lyrical."

"Lyrical." His voice curled around the syllables of my name. "Like a song, or a melody. It is not the name of a slave. It is the name of someone beloved."

"My mother gave it to me. And yes, I believe she loved me. But a welaway killed her, long ago."

"They are a scourge upon the land." The man's voice sank lower, weighed with sadness. "I too lost loved ones to them. I did not handle it well. In those days, my salve for wounds of the heart was drink and debauchery. Delightful in the moment, but ultimately unsatisfactory, don't you think?"

Heat roared into my face. "I wouldn't know. I haven't had occasion to try either one."

Another tense silence followed before he said softly, "You're a virgin."

"I probably would have fetched a pretty price at auction." I tried to chuckle carelessly, but it came out as a wretched little squeak full of nerves and fear. I continued, determined to sound stronger and more worldly-wise than I was. "I never understood why men place such value on virginity. You would think they'd appreciate a woman who'd had lovers before, and who knew exactly how to provide the best experience."

"It's not about that," said the voice behind my chair. "Most men achieve pleasure easily. No, the taking of virginity is about more than pleasure—it's about pride, and claiming, and ownership."

"No one owns me, or ever will," I snapped.

"But someone would have owned you, had the welaways not attacked your cart. And some men would pay a king's ransom for the chance to break down a bold, feisty little renegade like you. They would crave the pleasure of making you soften and submit."

I swallowed a pulse of panic. My fingers gripped the arms of the chair so hard my hands began to ache. "I think I should leave."

"Right now? With the welaways prowling outside the walls? Nonsense. You should stay, and have a full bath, a hot meal, and a good sleep."

"I'm not sure I feel comfortable remaining here, sir. Not after all your talk of—of virgins and claiming."

"Have I made you uncomfortable? It was not my intent." There was an openness to the shape of his words that made me think he was smiling, and that yes, he had definitely intended to make me uncomfortable.

"I swear I will not claim you in that way," he continued. "Unless you demand it."

"That will not happen."

"So sure, are you? Tell me, did you enjoy the scent of the rose?"

As he spoke, the rose's sultry fragrance slithered under my nose again, sinking into my skin, waking the same tingling sensation between my legs.

"That is not fair," I protested. "There is some magic in that smell—you're cheating."

"You believe that using magic is cheating?"

"Isn't it? You are plying an advantage others do not have."

He hissed a laugh. "Is it cheating when a gifted orator moves a crowd with his words? Is it unfair when a musician, equipped with talent and practice, brings everyone to tears with his song, or inspires them all to dance? Is it wrong when a general plans a clever attack that outmatches his enemy?"

I fumbled for a response. "Well—when you put it that way—I suppose not."

Every inhale of that fragrance inflamed me more, liquid heat pooling between my legs until I could scarcely process a clear thought. I squeezed my thighs tightly together. "Even so, a noble, honorable man would not treat his guest in this way."

"I shall make a note of that," he said. "But before I do, enlighten me—what has made you believe that I am in any way noble or honorable?"

Again I struggled for words, while my stomach twisted with nerves because he was right—there was absolutely no reason to believe that he was either honorable or noble. Like common folk, the owners of castles must come in all shades, from cruel to crass to compassionate.

"I have no reason to believe it," I told him. "But your voice sounds kind."

He gave a shuddering hiss as if to contradict my words. The animalistic quality of the sound was undeniable. Whoever this man was, he did not have the usual human mouthparts. Either that, or he was magically altering his voice to sound more lizard-like or serpentine.

"If you want me to remove the scent," he said, "I will do so. You have only to ask. But if you would like to enjoy it for a while, you may. Your first lesson as my guest is that nothing is prohibited here. You are free to take pleasure whenever and however you please."

The tickling sensation along my folds increased with every inhale. I writhed in the chair, fighting not to touch myself.

Virgin though I was, I'd pleasured myself before, many times. It was one of my few delights amid the dull drudgery of my existence. But for days I had been too busy to give myself such tending. I had been so exhausted I would fall asleep the moment my head touched the pillow.

As the sensual fragrance of the magic rose suffused my nostrils, sank into my lungs, into my belly, I arched against the chair cushions. And in spite of myself, I let out a mewling whimper.

"That didn't sound like a request to remove the scent," crooned my host. "Why stand on ceremony, little runaway rabbit? There is no one here to know if you want to give in to a little delicate magic." I let another moan escape—frustration and desire mingled. I'd escaped rapacious slavers only to be lured into the stronghold of a debauched sorcerer. Just my luck.

The words quivered on my tongue—a request to be set free from the tempting fragrance, from the lust burning between my thighs.

But the same dark, hollow craving from when I plucked the rose surfaces again—a haunted, desperate longing for what I'd always been denied—pleasure, attention, self-indulgence. Did I not deserve a little wicked pleasure? And had my host not already sworn not to claim me unless I requested it? This castle seemed utterly empty except for the two of us. No fear of any observation or censure, except from the owner of the sibilant voice, the sorcerer who used his magic for pleasure.

Perhaps this was even a dream. And dreams as delicious as this should be enjoyed.

"More," I whispered. Barely audible, but the sorcerer heard it, and chuckled as a fresh wave of the lecherous scent rushed over me.

I twisted, gasping, sliding lower in the chair, barely conscious of the claw marks across my back. The pleasure was softening the pain, muting it. Every delicate nerve, every tender bit of skin between my legs was buzzing, glowing. Desperately I raked up the ravaged bits of my nightdress and slid my fingers into my folds, manipulating the damp flesh.

"I can hear how wet you are," my host murmured. "Touch yourself, little rabbit. Swirl those little fingers over your center, plunge them into that sweet opening. Faster, yes, that's it. You'll come quickly, but it won't satisfy you for long. You'll need more."

I was barely listening, desperately working two fingers over the sensitive bud at the top of my sex. Spirals of glimmering pleasure exploded from that tiny spot, and I arched again, short sharp whines breaking from my lips as I soared, rigid with bliss, and then caved back into the chair, gasping through the warm ripples of pleasure.

Dazed, I came back into myself, slowly realizing what I had done in this room, in this dream of wicked warmth and tantalizing scents.

"Good girl," said the soft male voice behind my chair. "Such a mess you made of yourself, naughty rabbit. I will give orders for your bath."

I heard the rustle of garments as he prepared to depart.

Immediately I pushed my nightdress back into place, yanked my feet from the copper basin, and leaped from the chair, darting around it.

But the master of the castle moved quicker than I did. He already stood several paces away from me, with his back turned.

He was very tall, a good head or more taller than me if he were standing upright, I would guess; but he seemed to be hunching a little under the heavy cloak that concealed his body.

"If I am going to stay here, I would like to see your face." I clung to the chair back for support, my legs still shaky from pleasure.

He hesitated. "At dinner. Not until then."

"Very well." I did not like waiting that long, without knowing the shape or face of my host. But what choice did I have, really?

"Where shall I find the bath?" I called after him.

"Take the left-hand staircase to the third floor, and turn left down the passage. Third door on the right."

I struggled with the impulse to thank him. Strangely, the surge of the orgasm through my body had both reawakened and refreshed me, more deeply than I could have predicted. I couldn't thank him for the climax, could I? I had done that to myself. He had merely offered the opportunity and provided the stimulus I needed to break through my mental barriers.

Staring at his cloaked back, I blushed as I murmured, "Thank you. For the bath, and for giving me shelter."

A low chuckle. "Don't thank me yet."

My host glided away into the great hall, disappearing through a shadowy doorway with his cloak trailing behind him.



A few moments later, when I felt fully recovered, I followed his directions, climbing the stairs slowly on my sore, puffy feet. At least I wasn't leaving bloody steps on the carpet.

This castle had clearly been around since the days when castles were dank, drafty stone affairs that offered little comfort and even less beauty. But since that time, someone had refinished the interior, adding beautiful dark trim, white plaster, and tapestries. The banisters of the stone staircase gleamed richly, polished to perfection; and though the steps themselves were rough stone, the carpet undulating along them was plush and thick, blood-red in hue. I could barely resist the temptation to curl my bruised toes into it.

The stale, unused smell of the castle changed when I reached the third floor. I recognized a familiar fragrance—that dark, lush, lascivious scent, like a heady inhale from between the deepest folds of a rose. This variant wasn't as lecherously compelling, though equally pleasant to inhale.

The third room on the right had a solid paneled door that stood ajar, and when I pushed it open a puff of warmth and steam rushed out, enveloping my tired body.

I closed the door behind me and shucked off my ruined nightdress. Immediately it whisked away, moving of its own accord, and dropped into the tiled fireplace at one end of the bathing room. The flames licked around it eagerly, gnawing it into ash.

Something about that hurried disposal of my only possession from home chilled my bones. I shivered, despite the warm steam.

The room was completely covered in glossy milk-white tiles as big as both my hands. Each tile bore delicate blue pictures of ivy-covered cottages and stone bridges, nude women draped beside wells and naked men lounging on benches. I peered at the images of the men. All of them had erect cocks in different shapes and sizes. The sight of them made my body flush and tingle all over again.

The bathtub itself was immense, made of porcelain, with iron fittings. I could see no pipes for the water. Perhaps it was magically transferred and heated from some source in the garden.

As the thought of the garden entered my mind, I thought also of the beast I had encountered there, the one with the head and legs of a bull. He had chased me, but without much intent, as if he really did not expect or want to catch me. During the brief moment in which I'd looked into his eyes, I had seen intelligence.

I decided to ask my host about that beast later on, perhaps at dinner.

Stepping into the bath, I whimpered at the blessing of the hot water. Deeper I immersed myself, making the most scandalous sounds of delight. Never had I felt such marvelous comfort. For several minutes I luxuriated, enjoying the hot ripples and the steam. Eventually I took soap from the washstand beside the tub and lathered my hair and skin before rinsing away the suds. The removal of body hair had become a more popular practice throughout the kingdom a decade or so ago, and although many in my village did not practice it, I had always enjoyed the sensation of smooth skin. I took up the small pearlescent razor beside the soap, and scooped a dollop of fluffy cream from the second dish on the washstand. Everything had been provided, so I might as well use it.

The razor moved as if of its own accord, with barely a touch of guidance from me. After a few minutes I let go of it altogether and lay with my legs arched over the sides of the tub, allowing it to shave me. And so it did, right down to the deft depilation of the tender folds between my legs.

"A magical razor," I murmured. "How odd, and how very convenient."

Once it had finished removing every bit of hair from my body, the razor rinsed itself and returned to the washstand.

Only then did I notice the narrow table against the opposite wall, and the vase set upon it—a vase of milk-white laced with curls of gold. And within the vase was my blood-red rose with the dark purpled edges.

I rose from the bath and walked, naked and dripping, to the rose. "How did you come to be here?" With one fingertip I stroked its velvety petals. "I am glad to see you again."

With a final caress, I gathered a towel from a nearby rack and wrapped myself in it, marveling at its cloudy softness. If I was to be so treated every day at this castle, I might never want to leave.



Unfair.

All of it. Hideously, horribly unfair.

Why should my identical twin be gifted with magic and not me? That question had haunted me from the time we were toddlers, from the moment when Everston had lifted a constellation of rose petals with the power of his mind, making them dance and twirl around our nurse, who laughed in delighted surprise.

From that moment on, Everston had been treated differently. No one cared that I had issued from our mother's womb a full ten minutes before him. No one cared that I was technically the oldest, and heir to our father's lands. None of that had mattered once everyone learned of Everston's magic.

Thrice weekly he'd trained with a sorcerer hired by our father. His progress had been so dramatic that his skills quickly outpaced the man, and my father had to bring in a wielder of a higher class to continue his training.

Not that any of Everston's training mattered now. He and I had been sequestered in this forsaken part of the woods for so long that any kingdom of ours had vanished, lost to the encroaching borders of other lords and rulers.

No one even knew we existed anymore. The walls and gates of this place were visible only to women, unattached and alone, who might happen to wander nearby. Only a dozen in a hundred years, and all of them seduced by my brother.

Unfair.

I rose from my bed of skins, unable to rest, unable to forget the girl from the maze, with her white face and her lavender eyes. An unusual color, one which usually hinted at fae blood or sorcerer ancestry. Could she be magically gifted in some way?

I snorted, my snout twisting in a grimace. That would be just my luck. They'd be a matched pair, she and Everston—two little magic-wielders locked in the castle, falling in love and breaking the curse together while I roamed friendless outside.

Not exactly friendless, perhaps. But all of the servants who were transformed into fountains and lanterns and living chess-pieces out here in the gardens had just as much reason to hope for my brother's success as for mine. They would be returned to their human forms no matter which of us princes found love first.

But, as the curse would have it, Everston and I could not *both* reclaim human form again. The first one to find true, mutual love would be granted that boon, while the other would be left a beast for eternity.

Unfair.

Everston kept ruining his chances with the girls who came to the castle. Even the redhead he'd plowed hadn't been The One, the curse-breaker.

What had gone wrong between her and Everston? He had certainly pleased her, yet there had not been real love between them.

And one day, like all the others, she'd been simply—gone. I could sense the loss of her presence, like a magical line had been snipped. Each of the girls hung like a phantom in the back of my mind, haunting me. Perhaps it was an echo of Everston's magic—or perhaps, since they plucked the rose from my domain, my consciousness was somehow linked with them even while they were in his possession.

Whatever the reason, I felt the disappearance of each woman in my very soul.

This time was different. This time the girl was no ghostly image haunting the edges of my consciousness. She was a waking dream, vivid and radiant. In my mind's eye I could see every detail of her, could perceive the flutter of her pulse through the thin skin of her neck.

This one I would not yield to Everston. I had given up earlier, when I could have caught her—curse my despair and my indecision! I should have caught her and forced her to come with me, no matter how much frightening her grated against my nature.

Was it not justified, if it was done in the pursuit of true love?

My heart swelled with new resolve, and I galloped toward the rear door of the castle.

Everston's magic prevented me from entering the castle itself, but he still had enough brotherly feeling to provide me with necessities of his own conjuring. Sometimes I laid broken garden implements at his doorstep, and he returned them to me fully mended, shining like new.

When there was nothing to mend, he left conjured food for me on the threshold of the kitchen door—sausages, bread, cake, fish. Occasionally there was a blanket, a packet of seed, or a fresh pair of scissors for trimming my fur.

I needed little, and Everston gave me little.

We did not look into each other's faces, and we did not speak.

Those daily gifts marked the only time when any door of the castle opened—save for the limited number of times it had opened to admit a young woman who fit the curse's particular specifications.

Sometimes I wished the curse would permit an old crone to wander in, and my brother would be forced to woo her out of desperation. That would be a laugh worth having.

Of course, an old woman might have expired at the mere sight of Everston. Though he was mostly human in form, the reptilian parts of him gave him a dreadfully demonic look.

I'd often wondered how long he'd had to work on the women, how much charm he had to exude, how many bribes he had to promise before they would allow him to touch them. At the start of the curse, he had vowed never to magically influence a woman's will in order to bed her.

I could only hope he had maintained that vow throughout these long years. Forcing a woman to yield her body could never be conducive to true love. I approached the rear of the castle, entering the fenced kitchen yard. Once it had been a bustling space, filled with caustic orders and gossiping voices and laughter. There had been farmers with wheelbarrows of produce, merchants with crates of pottery tucked snugly in straw, kitchen maids whipping out tablecloths and tossing dirty dishwater into a trench that channeled it away toward the gardens.

An old pump sat idle in the yard. As I approached, it raised its handle weakly in greeting.

When the curse took effect, Mistress Hobbs, the most gossipy cook in the kitchen, had been merged with the pump. As rumors once flowed through her, so now flowed the water.

Had Hobbs done some minor wrong to the Faerie who cursed us all? Her fate seemed especially lonely and humiliating.

I chuffed a greeting to her and walked toward the kitchen door, my bull's tail writhing with agitation. Every day at the dinner hour, the scraps or tokens from my brother were set outside. That hour was approaching, and with it, my chance of catching our new guest's attention.

I could think of only one way to do it.

A bellow, loud and long, rolled from my chest. I put everything I felt into that roar—my pain, my hope, my despair, my yearning. When the echoes had faded I roared again, and then again. Three bellows, wrung from the meat of my heart.

My voice used to charm women as thoroughly as Everston's magic did. The court would beg me to sing, requesting my voice eagerly and honestly, not coddling to my vanity. They asked Everston, too, but half-heartedly, and only after I had finished singing for them.

I had not sung anything in nearly a hundred years. I could speak, yes—in a gruff voice, little more than a growl. But my human vocal cords were no more, lost forever in the matting of beastly flesh and fur.

My bull's legs wobbled under me, and I sat clumsily down by the door to wait for my beggar's portion from my illustrious brother.

There was no knowing if the woman had heard my outcry or not. Everston might have put some charm on the place to dampen sounds from the outside. If so, I might as well have whistled into the wind.

I tilted my shaggy head back against the stone wall. The tips of my horns grazed the rock lightly, and the contact set my teeth on edge. I groaned and closed my eyes.

Moments later, the kitchen door opened, and I saw one of the brooms hopping on the kitchen flagstones, nudging a small meat pie in a dish. Every little sweep drove it nearer, and every second that passed was a lost chance for the girl appear. When I'd seen her earlier, there had been a curious light in her eyes, mingled with the fear. Would that curiosity be strong enough for her to want another look at me?

No, that was nonsense. She had run from the mere sight of me. My foolish roaring had probably cemented the notion that I was a beast no better than a welaway, something to be avoided at all costs.

What woman in her right mind would come *closer* to such a fearsome sound? What girl would dare to approach the source of such beastly bellows?

I scrambled upright, clopping closer to the kitchen step, ready to collect my bit of food, ready to run the instant it was safely in my grasp. I would flee back to my cottage, alone, away from mysterious golden-haired women with lavender eyes.

A faint inhale drew my gaze up, from the pie to the broom, and then to a figure standing *behind* the broom, a feminine figure gilded with the light of the kitchen fire.

The girl was dressed for dinner in a gown of crinkled purple fabric, with her yellow hair waving loose around her face and neck. She wore a single bright jewel between her breasts—which were left partly exposed by the low neckline of the gown.

We stared at each other for a long moment, while the broom continued pushing my pie past the threshold.

"That was you, crying?" said the girl breathlessly. "Are you in pain?"

I had fabricated so many convincing speeches, formulated so many beautiful phrases to use in case I ever encountered one of our guests. Every word of them fled my mind, and I was left gaping, nearly drooling, while the girl gazed at me with a kind of pitying intensity.

"Can I help you in some way?" she asked. "Would you—can you come inside?"

I managed a few words, gruff and gravelly. "I am not allowed."

"Why not?"

The broom ceased its hopping. Its mission was accomplished; the meat pie lay on the step, ready for the taking. The broom swept backward, shifting against the door to push it shut.

"My brother will not allow it," I said.

"Your brother?" The girl frowned.

The broom pressed against the door; it was closing rapidly.

But the girl thrust out a hand to keep the door open. "Who are you? Who is your brother? What is going on in this place?"

The broom rustled and creaked, and three kitchen chairs and a large pot came to its aid, exerting pressure, trying to force the door shut.

"Stop it!" exclaimed the girl. "I want to talk to him!"

But the door was closing, heavy and inexorable. "Tomorrow," I barked; and then it slammed shut.

I could hear the girl inside, berating the bewitched objects, yanking at the handle, swearing most foully when she found it was magically sealed and she could not open it.

I had not smiled in decades, but at the sound of those vile words on her lips, my own mouth twitched in response.

A harsh repeated rhythm issued from me. A gruff, ugly, demented sound. I was *laughing*.

At the sound of my laughter, the girl's exclamations ceased. The next second her voice drifted through the hair-thin crack between the door and its frame.

"You there, bull-man," she said. "Can you still hear me?"

"I can," I replied.

"You said tomorrow. What did you mean?"

"I am permitted to retrieve food or other objects from this step at dinnertime every day. If you wish to speak to me, you may do so then." "Is your brother the sorcerer of this castle? Perhaps I can ask him to open the door."

"That would not be wise. He cannot know that you spoke to me. I'm not sure what he would do to either of us."

Guilt flickered in my soul at the foreboding words. My brother was no murderer—at least, I told myself he was not. But there was the matter of the missing women. I did not know where they went when he was finished with them.

How should I know what he would really do to me, to the girl? I was not lying—merely warning her of dire possibilities.

"Very well," she said. "Tomorrow, at this same time. Enjoy your dinner."

"And you," I answered gruffly. "Enjoy yours."

No response. She must have left the kitchen.

Gathering my bundle, I raced back through the garden, my heart thundering in my chest.

I had made contact.

I'd planted seeds of doubt about Everston.

And I had arranged another meeting.

It was more than I'd managed to do in a hundred years.



Through the magic of the carefully placed rose and my golden orb, I watched the girl in the bath. The sight of her nubile, naked body turned me hot and hard again, harder than I'd been when I stood behind the high-backed chair, listening to the wet sounds and frantic mews as she pleasured herself.

In that moment she had known I was there, and consented to coming in my presence. I knew I should not be spying on her bath, but I told myself I deserved the sight. Trapped here for nigh on a century, with only a dozen or so female visitors during that time—it was only natural I should want to enjoy this woman's form.

When she hooked her legs over the side of the tub, allowing herself to be shaved, she looked so open and vulnerable and delicious, I could not bear it.

I slid down my pants and pulled out my cock, closing my clawed hand gingerly around it. I stroked myself hard and quick, reveling in the sight of that pink pussy spread wide, that glistening slit revealed between the parted lips of her sex. She had a prominent clit, swollen and kissable. I wanted to suckle it, and to taste the pretty beaded nipples on her soft breasts.

But as I devoured the sight of her, I despised myself, with an unrelenting wretchedness that sank its claws bone-deep in my soul.

I turned away from the globe and its view of the girl, and I tore the covering from the mirror in my room, staring at myself in all my hideous ugliness. My slit pupils were flared with arousal, and my long tongue lolled between my serrated teeth.

I hated myself in that moment, so fiercely that I wanted pain, pain, pain. What a despicable low point I had reached, spying on my guest

without her consent, just to satisfy my own urges.

Screeching in agony, I threw myself at the mirror. My body crashed into the gleaming surface and it shattered, shards raining to the floor. A few of them sliced my skin, and I welcomed the pain.

More pain. I need more.

I picked up a shard of mirror and set it to my lower stomach, tracing a long red line across my skin.

Had Caswell ever tried to kill himself? I had, twice, but the curse would not let me. I could punish myself, though. The cuts might heal within minutes, but the anguish was a worthy price to pay.

"You foul, disgusting monster," I whispered to my reflection, broken into countless pieces around me. I dragged the shard across my stomach again, and then I dropped it and collapsed on my hands and knees, my scaly palms leaking blood as they pressed into the broken glass. Sobs heaved from my belly, shaking my lungs and dragging painfully from my throat.

"I cannot continue to live this way." The ragged words were for no one but myself. No other living beings were allowed in my chambers. "I cannot. Please kill me. Please, let it end."

I had prayed the same plea to the Faerie for years, knowing she could not hear me, knowing she would never answer. My magic was concentrated here, and I could not push a message beyond the walls of the estate. Still, I retained a fragment of hope that she might have left some magical tether in place—some way to keep an eye on my brother and I in our torment.

"I am sorry, Andralia," I whispered. "Forgive me. Please forgive me, and end it. My remorse is true—can you not feel it?"

Her last words to me still echoed in my mind. "I loved you, you fool. And you gave me away. Shared me, as if I were a prize mare you could lend to your brother for a quick ride. You shall learn not to account women so cheaply. You will know the value of love."

I had transformed into a beast as she'd spoken the last words, and the shock of it was so great I could not form a reply, could not explain or protest, could not beg or plead. It had taken me weeks to learn how to speak with my new teeth and tongue.

If Andralia had ever heard my cries and pleadings in the succeeding months and years, she had turned a deaf ear to all of

them. The ache of her absence had never truly faded. Even now I could feel it inside me, like a wound scabbing over only to be scraped raw again.

I could have loved her. Perhaps I *had* loved her. Knowing I'd crushed that fragile affection with my own hand was the worst kind of torment.



After a time, I dragged myself from the glass-littered floor and checked the globe again.

The girl had carried the rose with her into the adjoining bedroom. She was nearly ready for dinner, clad in the purple gown her sentient wardrobe had selected for her. It was a fitting choice, perfectly suited to her shape. Even though the royal dresser was now confined to the shape of a wardrobe, he had not lost his touch. He could still dress a woman in a gown that perfectly encapsulated her personality while highlighting her best physical features and complementing her coloring.

The enchanted bathwater had done its duty as well. The worst of the girl's wounds had closed, though a few bruises still colored her fair skin. I wanted to kiss each bruise, pressing deeply to show her the delicate merging of pain with pleasure. If only I had my original form, my perfectly shaped human lips instead of this stretched-out mockery of a mouth.

No use fretting over my human features. I'd been without them for so long I could barely recall them anyway.

I should prepare for dinner as well.

In the bathing room adjoining my personal parlor, I filled a tub of warm water for myself and plunged in, submerging my entire body. The liquid washed away the blood, and the gurgle of the water in my ears cleansed the ever-churning cesspool of my thoughts.

I would pretend to be clean, to be new. I would erase all the ugly deeds and creeping darkness from my mind, and I'd begin again.

I would fake worthiness and honor, and then, once I convinced myself, I might be able to convince the girl that I was noble of heart.

I spent so much time under the water that I was nearly late for dinner. Once, when I resurfaced, I thought I heard the end of a distant roar. But I listened again, and there was nothing at all.

Shrugging, I dried my skin and scales, and I fashioned myself a lower garment from velvety dark cloth. I swept my cape over myself and pulled the capacious hood forward so it would bury my features in deep shadow.

Thus armed for dinner, I descended from my tower. The stair treads were perilously narrow for one with such broad clawed feet as mine, but I'd learned to navigate them.

Sometimes I turned the stairs into a slide and slithered down to the first floor, but I dared not expend too much magic now. I had conjured my brother's dinner earlier in the day, and I still needed ample magic to craft a decadent meal for my new guest.

The brooms, dusters, and candelabra had been busy about the dining room, reclaiming its gloomy unused carcass and turning it into a pleasant, welcoming space. This was the small family dining room, not the grand one for dinners with visiting lords and their relatives.

The family dining room was once reserved for me and Caswell and our parents. We had eaten many a pleasant meal there together.

On the night Caswell and I played our trick on Andralia, my parents had recently departed for the South, on a mission of mercy to villages ravaged by a series of tornados. My mother had wanted to investigate the occurrences, which seemed too frequent and destructive to be of natural means. She had intended to use her magic to discern the source of the tornados, while my father oversaw the distribution of goods to those most in need.

They must have tried to come home a week later, only to be turned back by the effects of the curse. Andralia had told us that none would be able to navigate the mist around the castle, save young women whose hearts were unattached.

"No living soul within its walls shall age or die, and I will leave you your magic so you do not starve," she had told me. But I suspected she'd left my magic intact because she did not know how to strip me of it. She was a Faerie, but not all-powerful.

I waved my hands to dismiss the cleaning implements from the dining room, and with flutters and bobs of obeisance they fled the space, leaving me to my work.

First I swept a snowy cloth over the table. Then I delved into my memories, eliciting clear images of roast beef, charred outside and the tenderest pink within—succulent fowl gleaming with orange glaze—soft rolls oozing melted butter and golden honey—fat, crisp grapes that burst into sugary juice between the teeth. I conjured a light, pale wine and a full-bodied red one; tarts glistening with jewel-red berries, plump squash sliced and roasted, sprinkled lightly with cheese and garlic and crystalline salt. Fleshy scallops, plump trout laced with lemon, and potatoes in creamy sauce appeared on great silver trays.

It was all real, and just as nourishing and satisfying as non-magical food. Most conjured foods lacked something in flavor, aroma, or sustenance, but I'd always had a gift with edibles. The conjuring of food and drink, and the movement of objects with my mind—those were my two primary strengths.

The planting and tethering of the rosebush in the maze was another source of pride for me. It had taken me a few years to perfect the spell, and it was my greatest magical feat beyond telekinesis and complex table spreads. Of course, there was no one to know and appreciate the full properties of the rosebush spell except me.

Thanks to the roses, I was able to bring all the women to my castle, giving myself the sole chance of winning their hearts. Unfair to Caswell, perhaps, but what hope could he have of winning a woman, clad as he was in a bull's head and legs? I was nearer to human aspect, more skilled in pleasing women, and therefore I must have better luck. There was no point in both of us remaining beasts forever. I must get myself free first, and then I could do some research and discover a way of turning Caswell back to himself.

But I had paid a price for getting the first and only chance at the girls. Or perhaps *they* had paid the price. There was a time limit set on the life of each rose, knotted inextricably to the length of the girl's stay and the cycles of her heart.

I tried not to think about what happened every time the final petal drifted from a girl's rose.

Once I'd conjured the dinner, I set a charm to maintain the food's flavor and temperature, while I created a spray of flowers to garnish the table. They shimmered in the candlelight, definitely less corporeal and convincing than the food. I was out of practice conjuring florals. Since a new girl had arrived, I would have to remedy that. I could practice later tonight, after she had gone to bed.

I had no illusions that she would want to sleep with me at once—it usually took many long days of incessant courting, delicate attentions, bribes, and insinuations before the women granted me physical access. Though this girl, spirited and hungry for carnal indulgence, might be different. She'd been neglected, overworked, underfed, and despised—that much was clear. She might be more easily lured into letting me fuck her.

I could not place her age. Sometimes she looked very young and vulnerable, no older than eighteen or so; and other times, when her fierce spirit shone out or her clever mind sharpened her tongue, she seemed to be in her middle twenties. She was surely of marrying age, as that was a rule of the curse. No one younger than eighteen. If there was an age cutoff at the upper end, Andralia had never mentioned it. But I had not seen a woman here over forty, perhaps because a woman of that age was likely to have her heart spoken for, either by a lover, or by children to whom she was responsible—or by her own self, having chosen a life of pleasant independence.

A rustle of fabric near the arch leading from the dining room to the kitchen passage startled me. I hunched deeper into the shadow of my cape, withdrawing my scaly hands into its shelter.

"I didn't mean to startle you." The girl moved forward.

Lyrical—her name was Lyrical—the flowing words of a song, and she moved like music.

As she emerged from the gloom of the passage, the golden candlelight glimmered against the purple clustered fabric of her skirt. Her slim waist, encased tightly in purple, bloomed upward into round breasts, and when she breathed they surged above the neckline of her dress.

The fabric clustered in two cap-sleeves around her upper arms, leaving her beautiful shoulders exposed.

The faint bluish color of her bruises called to my most violent instincts, to the nature of the creature merged with my body. Like

Caswell, I had a latent taste for brutality, for hunting, and for raw flesh. Most of the time I could keep it submerged, but sometimes, it reared up inside me, coiled and tense. Ready to strike.

The monster in my soul envied the creature who'd caused those marks on her skin. My gums ached, and my tongue trembled in my mouth. I longed to sink the tips of my fangs into those tender little bruises, to suck the nectar of her sweet blood—

"Does my presence displease you?" the girl said quietly.

"What?" I asked, shocked out of my reverie.

"You are staring, without saying a word. Are you regretting your hospitality? Or is something wrong with my appearance?"

"No, nothing." I would have liked to sweep all the food from the table and lay her out upon it instead. I wanted to crush the fabric of her dress, crumple it in my hands as I lifted it to expose that delicate parted place between her legs. I would nudge those breasts from their hiding place and take a luscious mouthful of each one—

No. No no no—

"Sit down," I barked. With my magic, I moved out a chair for her. It skidded sharply aside, startling her, and she shrank back, eyes wide

The expenditure of magic subdued my cravings a little, and I was able to focus—to notice how white and drawn her face was, and how desperately her gaze raked over the food. She was starving. She probably had not eaten all day, and judging by what little I knew of her story, I doubted her family had much to eat at home.

"Please sit," I said, more gently.



The sorcerer was clearly not human. If I hadn't already guessed that by his voice, I could tell by the way he settled himself awkwardly into a chair at the opposite end of the long table. He moved as if his limbs weren't constructed for such seating, and he took great pains to keep his form concealed beneath the heavy cloak he wore.

My own chair was the most comfortable I'd ever had the pleasure of sitting in—thickly cushioned, with curved armrests perfectly positioned.

The aroma of the food nearly knocked me over. I thought I might faint before I managed to get a morsel of it in my mouth.

My fingers trembled as I tried to serve myself with a modicum of the poise one should have when dining in such a fine space. It was no use—I fumbled and dropped a spoonful of potatoes. The herb-flecked cream splattered across the tablecloth.

"I'm so sorry," I gasped. Tears started, hot and sharp, in my eyes. I could feel my throat tightening, filling with an irrepressible sob.

"It's nothing," he said. Something—his hand?—twitched under the cape, and the creamy potatoes picked themselves neatly off the tablecloth and floated toward me. More of the food swept itself up and soared along the table's length, coming to rest on my plate.

"You can move things with magic?"

"I can." He sounded bored, as if it was an old trick.

"It's incredible."

"Many find it fascinating. Please, partake. I know you are hungry for more than sexual delight." I flushed, remembering that I'd had an audience when I climaxed in the chair by the fire. Strangely, it had only enhanced my pleasure, rather than dampening it.

But thoughts of lust and my curiosity about his magic could wait. My belly demanded immediate attention.

Everything looked delectable, and each mouthful was like a savory promise fulfilled—more flavorful and satisfying than I could ever have imagined. After the blade of my hunger was dulled, I watched my host through my lashes while I finished my meal. He was eating, too, but clumsily, still obsessed with maintaining the covering of the cloak.

"If I had your powers," I said, sinking my fork into another potato, "I would make that ridiculous cape disappear. You can't possibly eat properly with all that cloth in the way."

He looked up, and in the deep shadow of the hood glimmered reflective, inhuman eyes. "It is a bit difficult," he admitted.

"So show yourself to me. Do you think I will flee screaming out of the door and down to the gate, where the welaways haunt the trees? Do you think I will scamper back to the family that rejected me, to be sold again? No. Whatever you are trying to hide, I won't run."

He fumbled with his fork, laying it down beside his plate, and I caught sight of the tips of sharp claws. "You are very bold. Bolder than I expected."

"Perhaps because I have no one to miss me and nothing to lose."

"Nothing to lose? Oh, foolish girl, there is always more to lose. Your virginity. Your flesh. Your life. Your soul." The last word he uttered darkly, as if that loss would be the worst of all.

"You want me to fear you."

"No." He sighed. "I would like to be your friend."

"My friend." I let the doubt in my heart flood my tone.

"It is a lonely existence, this."

"I assume it must be. Can you leave? Are you bound here by magic, or do you stay because of your form?"

"Your intelligence is terrifying," he said, and the tone was not entirely sarcastic. "You are catching on much more quickly than—"

He caught himself.

"Much more quickly than who? Has someone else come here before me?"

"By the gods—you are injured, exhausted, and half-starved, yet your mind is quick as lightning!" He shoved back his chair. "What are you like when you are well-fed and rested?"

"I'm a force of nature," I told him, smiling. "I'm the one who managed to keep my family fed and clothed and out of the poorhouse for years, until now. Gods only know what will happen to them without me."

"Do you care?"

"They sold me off like a cow, so I shouldn't care." But my heart ached with the certainty that in a month, or perhaps less time, my sisters and my father would be frantic, penniless and scrabbling for a way to survive. Then they would understand what they had done. They would finally realize all the work I did to keep our family whole—the odds and ends I scraped together, the small jobs and errands that filled our money chest—a chest they emptied as fast as I could tuck the pennies inside.

"They will go to ruin on their own," I said softly. "I should not pity them, but I do."

Again the tears swelled in my eyes. Perhaps the sorcerer saw my lip trembling, because he rose from the table so sharply that I startled.

"A boon, in exchange for your honesty, and as a reward for your compassion and your boldness," he said. "You let me listen to the sweet sounds of your pleasure. I will show you my form, and may you not faint at the sight."

My host threw off the cape and stood bared to me, clad only in a loose garment of dark cloth around his hips and groin.

He was partly human in aspect, with the pale sculpted torso and arms of a perfectly proportioned man. But his fingers were inhumanly long, sheathed in blue scales, tipped with talons.

His legs were those of a lizard, or perhaps a dragon, each with three massive front toes pressing the ground and a clawed back toe lifting slightly off the floor. A serpentine tail, coated with the same tiny blue scales, issued from his rear; it wriggled and curved through the air as he watched my reaction.

And his face—his face was serpentine, yet beautiful. Large purple eyes, a wicked set of harsh features with bones too angled and too prominent—skin faintly textured, scaly, with pointed bluish ridges defining his cheekbones. His nose lay flat, slit nostrils flaring with every breath.

A cascade of blue spines began at his hairline, trailing in abundance from his tapered skull and marching halfway down his back.

But his mouth was the most off-putting thing about him. Too wide, much too wide—frighteningly wide, like a demon's over-stretched smile.

That smile extended through his cheeks, almost literally from ear to ear, and within the horribly exposed cavern of his mouth were rows of sharp pointed teeth. A long tongue slithered out, forked at the end and glistening purple, sinuous and lecherous.

"Well?" he said, in that faintly sibilant voice of his. No wonder he spoke that way; with so many teeth, and that wide yawning mouth, and that serpent's tongue, it was a wonder he could speak intelligibly at all

"You are—fascinating," I breathed.

His spiny eyebrows flexed, arching high. "Fascinating? Try disgusting."

"No." I shook my head, rising from my seat and walking around the long table. "Not disgusting."

Slowly I approached him, extending my hand. He did not move, but the planes of his chest rose and fell a little faster.

My palm contacted his skin. I had never touched a man's bare chest before, but in this castle of curses and wickedness, all impulsive and improper things seemed possible, and permissible.

I swept my palm across the expanse of his skin, feeling the bulge of his pectorals and the grooves of his ribs, and the hard packed muscles of his stomach. I explored the dip of his navel, and the flat of his abdomen. "You had better not explore any lower," he said stiffly. I looked up, and his sharply cut jaw was tight, a muscle flexing along it. The cords of his neck stood out, tense and restrained.

Removing my hand, I walked behind him and lightly caressed the blue spines with my fingertips. They reacted to my touch, lifting and brightening slightly in color. The longer I stroked them, the higher they rose, and the more brightly blue they glowed.

I moved in front of him again to inspect his expression. His savage face was a mask of wonder. "No one has ever touched them like that," he said. "I did not know they could react in that way."

"Truly?" I lifted my eyebrows. "How long have you been like this?"

"Nearly a hundred years."

"And you had no idea they could do this?"

"None."

"Perhaps I should keep going."

His wide, wide mouth twitched. "I think it is better if you stop."

My gaze dropped between his legs, where the dark material swathed around his crotch stood out, an unmistakable prominence pushing against it.

In the villages where I'd found work, and sometimes on the road between there and home, men had sometimes waggled their erections at me, cupping the bulges through their pants or boldly pulling out their cocks, as if their red, smelly, hairy parts were something to be proud of.

I had always been disgusted by those displays. But for the first time, I found myself wanting to see a male's cock.

My fingers curled around the fabric, pushing it lower, the angled ledges of his hipbones guiding me. Small flat scales, smooth to the touch, appeared along his lower abdomen.

His stomach was ridged with tension, surging with eagerness as I pushed the garment lower still, over the bulge beneath it.

His cock popped out, huge and thick, garnished with the same small, close-set blue scales as his lower belly, and ending in a large, satin-smooth head with a tiny slit. Without thinking, I cupped my hand around it and stroked, from the head toward the base and then back again, just to see how it felt. It was smooth, with enough texture that I could imagine it feeling wildly tantalizing in a person's vagina.

My host groaned quietly, and I snatched back my hand. "I'm sorry," I gasped. "I should have asked first."

"If I'd wanted you to stop I would have spoken up," he said in a strangled voice.

I stared at him, at the monstrosity of his body. I knew I should feel horrified. I should be ashamed of my obscene behavior since I arrived here.

But I thought him beautiful, and savage, and sad. And I had nothing. Nowhere to return, nowhere to go. No one in the world knew where I was, and no one could see me or judge anything I did.

For the first time in my bleak life, I was truly free.

And I had a monster at my mercy, his cock twitching with the desire to be touched. Desire for *me*.

My fingers wrapped around his length again, squeezing lightly, sliding along the shaft one more time. I was tempted to continue, to see how far I could push him. After a day of such vulnerability and danger, it felt good to be in control again. But if I went too far, the power could revert to him. I could not withstand an onslaught if this creature decided to attack me, or take me by force.

And I could not forget the warning of the bull-headed monster at the back door, that his brother was not to be trusted.

I removed my hand from his cock, carefully pulled his garment back into place, and returned to my seat.

"Thank you for trusting me with this revelation," I said. "I'll admit I am terribly curious—how did you come to be in this state?"

"That is a long tale, and one I do not usually divulge on the first night." Then he bit his wide lips with his sharp teeth, as if he had said something he did not mean to.

"Usually? On the first night? Then I was right—there have been other guests here, others like me?"

He swore and threw himself back into his seat. "You have thrown me into confusion, little rabbit. I seem to have forgotten how I should act—how to be careful and reveal a little at a time. Or perhaps I have tired of the charade. Heaven knows I've been at it long enough."

"You're under a curse, aren't you?"

"How could you tell?" he snorted. Tipping back his head, he poured a copious amount of wine straight down his throat. I winced at the sight. I had never cared much for the taste of drink, though I liked the warmth in my belly, the pleasantness that followed its consumption.

"Where do you get the wine, and the food?" I asked.

"Magic."

I pushed my plate away a little, staring suspiciously at the remnants of my meal.

"Do not fear," he said, chuckling. "It is not cursed. You will not turn into some monstrous creature like me. And it is not drugged, either—I will not creep into your bed tonight. You have a beautiful body, worthy of enjoyment, and it would be a delight to fuck you and pleasure you—but it would end badly, for both of us."

"How so?" I shivered with anticipation at his mention of fucking and pleasure. "What happened to the others who ended up here?"

"They—went away." He traced the stem of his wine-glass idly, with knife-sharp nails. "All I can tell you is, keep your rose safe."

"The one I plucked in the garden?"

"Yes."

"I knew I should not have taken it," I muttered.

"And yet you did. They all do. Do not judge yourself too harshly—the roses are magical, after all, and difficult to resist. Though I rather think you could have, if you wanted to."

With a sly look at me, he shoves back his chair again. "I will retire to my rooms now, I think. If you like, I can show you to the library before I leave you. Then you will have something to read this evening. You can read, yes?"

"I can."

"Good. Not all the women who have come here were educated."

"As I said, I took care of the household affairs at home—the correspondence, bills, everything."

"You also mentioned the poorhouse," he said slowly. "What is a poorhouse?"

"A terrible huge building where the poor must live when they have nowhere else to go. The work is hard, and the cots are harder, and there is naught but gruel and thin soup to eat, I've heard." I shuddered, remembering the tales I'd been told in whispers by other women at market. "Women suffer the most in such places."

"As they always seem to suffer at the hands of careless men," he agreed. In his tone there was something of remorse, a deep regret that time had not salved, a wound not healed, a wrong not forgiven. "Well, my dear, you have no violence to fear from me—at least not of that kind, and not tonight. Allow me to show you my collection of books."

Primly I rose from my seat, lifting my skirts as I imagined a fine lady might. "I would be delighted, good sir."

The grin that flashed over his monstrous face was horrifying in the extreme. My own smile faltered, and I had to swallow hard to keep from screaming. Even so, my heart turned jittery in my chest.

He must have noticed the change in my face, because his own grin vanished at once, replaced by a visible pang of self-conscious hurt. He turned without another word and led the way to the front hall, and from there along a lengthy corridor.

I followed in his wake, silently cursing myself for allowing my face to show that moment of fear and revulsion. He knew himself to be hideous and inhuman. He needed no such reminder from me, nonverbal or otherwise. I must school myself to control my features and my reactions better.

He did not seem like a horrible, dangerous beast. Certainly not nearly as terrible as his bull-headed brother made him out to be. Though to be fair, I hadn't had much time to talk with the brother and learn the truth of the matter. It was much too soon to be trusting either one of them.



She thought I was disgusting, horrifying. Of course she did. So had the other dozen or so women who had found their way here, until time and proximity wore down their natural fears and inhibitions, making them more susceptible to my particular brand of erotic charm.

I operated on the principle that every woman secretly longs to fuck a monster, to be craved in an animalistic way, to be dominated by something strange, demonic, and alien. I teased them with seemingly accidental swipes of my tail, harmless displays of my tongue's mobility, casual flexes of my abdomen and arms. Eventually they all gave in, lured by the opportunity for filthy secret pleasure. *No one outside the castle has to know*, I would whisper—and so their inhibitions dissolved, some faster than others.

But this girl was different. She'd already guessed a few key points of my situation and persuaded me to reveal myself to her on the first night. She had let herself come in my presence, and she'd stroked my cock a few times, of her own free will. And now she trotted amicably behind me, posing curious questions about the elaborate paintings and ornate statuary we passed in the hallways.

I knew every piece and its history intimately—I'd had ample time to study the history of this place. But after answering several questions about the sculptors who'd crafted the pieces and the relatives depicted in the portraits, I spun around and confronted the girl with a flash of my teeth and claws.

She sucked in a gasp and her eyes flared wide, but she held her ground.

"Why are you asking all these questions?" I growled. "You cannot possibly be this interested in the works of bygone artists and the intricacies of my family tree."

"It's called *conversation*," she said primly. "Perhaps you've forgotten how to do it."

Her pursed lips glistened temptingly pink. She looked so adorably delicious that the monster inside me crawled forward eagerly, hungrily. I ran my tongue across my wide, wide mouth. "Perhaps I have. Perhaps I've forgotten how to do many things."

"You've certainly forgotten to introduce yourself properly. What is your name?"

"It's Everston." My eyes trailed across her bruises, and my claws twitched in response. I could feel my control shuddering, slipping.

"Everston." She spoke sharply, a crisp blade into the festering flesh of my thoughts. "The library?"

"Yes—the library. Come. And no more questions."

"As you like."

She followed in silence—which wasn't any better for me, since it left me to focus on the gentle ebb and flow of her breath, her steady heartbeat, and her soft footsteps. I ached to throw her down on the carpet and mark her with my teeth and claws—to plunge into that virginal softness and hear her shriek—not with fear, but with delight.

So immersed I was in my thoughts that I nearly strode past the library. But I managed to notice in time, and I paused before the immense doors.

"I come here often," I said. "I have read every one of these volumes—some more than once."

With a scrape of claws against wood, I shoved the doors open and lit the sconces inside with magic.

The room lit up—all three stories of arched bookshelves and walkways and balconies. The ceiling swept up to a fantastically painted scene of nude Fae creatures dancing and coupling in a meadow.

The carpet squished and split beneath my lizard-like feet. I was constantly having to repair things with my magic—threadbare

fabric, moldering sofas, ripped rugs and shredded wallpaper. There was so much to manage that sometimes I simply left things to decay.

At the sight of the books, Lyrical clapped both thin white hands over her mouth, and her lavender eyes pooled with tears. She let out a hiccup of heart-broken wonder.

The other women had reacted favorably enough to the library. The one with red hair—Reza—she had run round the place, eyes shining, ecstatic. But then again, she'd been a volatile sort, wild about things one minute and careless of them the next.

Reza had treated me the same way she'd treated the library—full of enthusiasm at first. And then, a day later, she'd acted like she couldn't care less.

Of all the women who had stepped into this bookish sanctuary of mine, none had wept with delight. But Lyrical stood rooted to the floor, overcome, tears slipping from her eyes and wetting her lashes each time she blinked.

"I've never seen so many books at once," she whispered. "And you keep them all here? No one gets to read them but you? That's a travesty. I cannot comprehend it. How can you not share this bounty with the world? I know of village schools who would love to have even a handful of these."

"How am I to share the bounty when I am trapped here?" I countered irritably. "Save your judgment for those who have a choice."

"I'm sorry." She swiped at her eyes. "If you would tell me more about what keeps you here, perhaps I—"

"Perhaps you could *help*?" My laugh dripped with sarcasm. "You, a village girl sold as a slave?" I leaned in, speaking softly in her ear, my hideous visage a breath from her cheek. "The soft little runaway virgin would help *me*, the powerful magical monster?" I laughed again, a harsh ringing sound that echoed maniacally through the space.

Lyrical's hand flashed out, and she gripped my jaw in her fingers. I froze, stunned by the touch, by her courage.

"You're trying to scare me," she hissed, her wet eyes gleaming with defiance and courage. "It won't work. I am tougher than most people think, stronger than they believe. I know the difference

between genuine evil and the cruelty that stems from inner pain. You're hurting, so you lash out. Well, you don't have to. Not with me, do you understand?"

My mind was blank with shock, my heart fluttering sore at being so deeply and quickly perceived.

Lyrical's expression changed. She released my face and looked down, where my snakelike tail had nudged beneath the hem of her gown and curled around her leg. An embarrassing and involuntary reaction on my part.

"I apologize," I said stiffly, drawing away. I could still feel the press of slim fingers clutching my jaw.

"Don't apologize," she said, eyeing the sinuous movement of my tail. "It's lovely, you know—your tail. I suppose it's useful as well."

"Very useful." My low tone carried a sensual significance, and by the flare of her lavender eyes I knew she understood the implication.

Lavender eyes. A sign of magical blood somewhere in her lineage. Yet I sensed no such power within her. If she'd had any magic, surely she would have used it to escape the slavers, or the welaways.

Lyrical stood, tense and still, watching the curl and slither of my tail. She was flushed, lips parted and eyes stormy, balanced on the edge of something she wanted and refused to admit aloud.

"Would you like me to show you what my tail can do, little rabbit?" I murmured.

She shuddered all over, but I could tell it was a shudder of anticipation. Hunger shone in her eyes, tinged with guilt.

"No rules here, remember?" I reached toward her, my claws clasping the neckline of her dress, teasing it lower as her breasts surged upward eagerly. There they were, those tight pink nipples, flushed with need.

"Ah," I hissed at the sight of them. "Exquisite."

I kept peeling the dress down, all the way down to her slim waist. She slipped her arms obediently out of the cap-sleeves and stood half nude before me, the golden flames in the sconces bathing her skin, turning it creamy and luscious.

Hissing my delight, I stepped behind her and snipped the buttons of the dinner dress with my claws, folding aside its halves, pushing it down. I slit the delicate fabric of her silken panties, and they floated down to the floor, the central bit of fabric wet and glistening from her soaked pussy.

She was entirely naked. On her first night.

I hadn't fucked anyone in the library yet. It seemed right that this woman, lustful and daring as she was, should be the first.



If my arrival at the castle had been a dream, I never wanted to wake.

Everston directed me to lie on one of the huge, gleaming oaken tables in the library. With his magic he pushed aside the few books and statuettes on its surface, replacing them with a pillow for my head.

"Spread your legs for me, little rabbit," he said. "Show me that beautiful pussy."

I kept my knees arched, thighs pressed together. The table was cold against my back, and the library, beautiful though it was, felt suddenly enormous and unfamiliar—like the cock I'd seen beneath his loincloth.

"I'm cold," I whispered.

He approached, his serpentine mouth parting—gaping—and a rush of warm, soft air emerged from his mouth, flowing over my skin like a comforting caress. His tail reared up beside the table, snaking through the air toward me. Gently its tip contacted my nipple, and I couldn't help a whine of pleasure as the end of his tail began to circle slowly, first teasing, then kneading the flesh of my breasts.

Wetness surged in my core at the stimulation, a warm gush that awakened every nerve in my pussy.

My knees parted, and I opened wide for my monstrous host.

He hummed softly and eagerly at the sight of me, his beautiful sharp-featured face lighting up.

When his mouth full of teeth approached my delicate parts, I tensed again.

"You are safe," he hissed, his voice more sibilant than ever. His long purple tongue slipped out, its forked ends writhing. "I will use thisss."

Oh gods.

My breath came fast, and faster—I stared up at the painting on the ceiling, a debauched Fae revel so beautifully depicted I could practically hear the deep groans, the harsh panting, the feminine moans shrilling higher, the bodies slapping together.

Slick, titillating flesh slithered along my pussy. Everston's tongue, gliding through my folds.

I shrieked softly, my arms stretching out, fingers clasping the edges of the table on which I lay. I had never felt anything so unbearably divine. I needed an anchor, something to ground me while he wriggled that slippery forked tongue between the lips of my sex. One writhing tip circled my clit, tickling it, while the second forked point kept squirming deeper, titillating—I clasped the table's edges harder, while Everston's tail massaged my breasts.

I looked down between my legs.

The monster was watching me, his purple eyes half-lidded, beautiful and liquid with lust. He smiled, a storm of knife-like teeth, and I trembled at how easily he could rip me apart, devour me, swallow the meat of me in slippery chunks.

Then his whole tongue plunged deep into my body, and I arched off the table, crying out, staring helpless and transfixed at the ceiling.

His tongue twirled *inside* me, a tornado of rippling sensation, and he hummed, causing it to vibrate slightly. I could feel something shifting, tearing or widening, as he delved into every secret space, as he explored my inner channel.

My body was inflamed, burning, surging—tiny shrill whimpers of need escaped me as he trailed his tail down my belly. His tongue withdrew from my hole, and his tail forged inside me instead. It plunged in and out, in and out, quicker, quicker—ah, ah—, while his tongue lashed and licked across my clit.

His tail made the most depraved squelching sound in my sex while he kept his head down, bathing my clit. Then he bent closer, sealing his lips carefully over the bud of nerves while his tail fucked me with impossible speed—and I bucked, arching again as my body exploded into white-hot stars.

I bit my wrist, trying to keep from shrieking, but his clawed hand grasped my arm and pulled it away from my mouth.

"Scream for me, little prey," he crooned. "Scream until it hurts."

My voice was already ragged from my shrieks of fear in the forest, but I screamed for him anyway, hoarse and broken with ecstasy.

He straightened. Pulled his wet tail out of my body.

As I came down from the peak, my body heaved, blissful and helpless—helpless to him as he dragged me toward the end of the table and pushed my legs into a more sharply bent position. He tore off the scrap off cloth around his waist and lined his cock up with my soaked entrance.

I could feel the violence of his need in the convulsive grip of his clawed hands on my knees. He held me open, his serrated teeth clenched, his purple eyes flashing. The silky tip of his cock poked wetly at my folds, while his slippery tail returned to rub my clit, reviving it, teasing it to eagerness again.

"I need to come inside you," he said raggedly. "I'm not fertile, so you need not worry. I cannot breed you."

My body wasn't sated yet. It was rioting, clamoring for more pleasure, aching for a greater fullness, greedy for a more thrilling completion. I nodded wildly, and he eased his cock head into my pussy, pushing slowly deeper.

His cock was thicker than his tail. It stretched me, but I was slick and ready, so there was no pain.

With an aching cry, as if he could not hold back any longer, he shoved fully inside me. His hands left my knees and swept over my breasts, his claws scratching me slightly as he gathered handfuls of my flesh.

He threw back his head, palms over my breasts, his forked tongue lashing with wild pleasure, and he began to fuck me. Hard, fierce, rough thrusts. I grabbed the table again to hold myself steady.

My mouth gaped, and I squealed faintly, my voice shrilling with each thrust. My back rubbed against the polished wooden table, and the scent of books mingled with the heavy smell of sex.

The texture of his cock, stimulating every bit of my inner walls, threw me into a delirious frenzy. Too much, too much, and yet it kept building.

I hovered near the peak, straining to reach it, every muscle tight.

Everston smashed his hands onto the table on either side of my head and dove down to me, his mouth open, his purple tongue sliding between my parted lips. I could smell him now—taste him—a heady, spicy scent, with an invigorating edge to it—the smell of danger.

His tongue coiled in my mouth, then slid down my throat for a few seconds. That quivering sensation of him writhing in my throat shocked me into the climax I'd been straining to achieve, launched me off the cliff's edge into a delirious void.



I kept my wide mouth pressed to hers, still pumping inside her while I swallowed each shrill, hitching breath that jerked from her body while she rode her climax.

Her pussy squeezed my cock, mercilessly tight, and I came with a violent shudder and a convulsive thrust deep, deep inside her body. My cock vibrated with the force of the orgasm as I spilled myself in her, filling her virgin hole with my cum.

First to claim her. Most likely the last as well.

The thought shook me out of my pleasure daze, rotted the last moments of my enjoyment.

She was doomed, though she didn't know it. Doomed, unless she could love me.

Perhaps she could learn to love me.

I dragged myself out of her, away from her, leaving her flushed and spent and leaking cum onto the table.

She had fresh bruises on her breasts. Delicious marks I wanted to bite.

But I'd taken enough from her. In one night, I'd gone farther with her than I'd gone in a month with the others.

This one was different. This one *had* to be different.

"How do you feel?" I asked her stiffly.

Sometimes, after I'd fucked a girl, she would recoil, horrified at herself and at me. Shocked at what she'd let herself do.

But Lyrical rolled her head aside to look at me, a lazy, sated smile on her face.

"I feared I might lose my virginity today," she murmured. "But I never imagined I might be this glad to give it. Do you know, I've never found human men very appealing? You're the first male I've ever wanted to fuck."

The impact of those words on me was nothing less than cataclysmic. To be valued and preferred, not treated as the last choice, the dirty pleasure, the available toy—it was the most beautiful kind of shock.

I swallowed hard, trying not to let my emotions flood my face. "I'm honored to be your first."

When I extended my arm for her to take, she allowed me to help her off the table. "Don't mind the mess," I assured her. "The servants will clean it up."

"The servants?" She arched an eyebrow. "You mean—the animated furniture?"

"Yes. There were once servants and guards here, now transformed into objects like this candelabra—" I touched a triple-armed candlestick on the table— "and that clock." I pointed to a clock sitting on a shelf nearby.

"How do I know what's alive and what isn't?"

"You can simply ask them." I retreated toward the door. "I shall retire for the evening. Thank you for the pleasure of your company at dinner—and afterward. Please help yourself to some books, and then you can ask the candelabra to show you back to your rooms."

She nodded, stepping into her dress and pulling it up into place while her eyes roamed the library shelves.

"Also—the instant you are done here, return to your rooms and stay there until morning, do you understand? On no account are you to wander through the castle at night. And do not go to the fifth floor for any reason. That level is off limits."

"Off limits?" Her head tilted, a spark entering her eye.

Ah, no. I could not have the mischievous rabbit wandering about. I must scare the idea out of her head.

"I mean it," I said firmly. "Go to the fifth floor, and I will kill you immediately, without remorse or pity. I'll flay the flesh from your bones with these claws." I flexed my fingers.

"Of course you will," she said gently.

Gods, was she patronizing me?

"No, you don't understand," I insisted, hardening my tone. "No one goes on the fifth floor except me. Am I clear?"

"As you wish. Good night, my lord." She bobbed a curtsy, and the obeisance gave me a delectable view of her cleavage, newly tucked into the neckline of the dress.

She caught my admiring gaze and gave me a tentative smile. "What we did—was I—was I all right? You enjoyed it?"

Her naughty innocence overwhelmed me. An ache started in the center of my throat, and I had to swallow it down. "You were magnificent."

I whirled and stalked from the room with as lordly a gait as I could manage on my monstrous feet.



After Everston left, I stood in the center of the library, paralyzed by its abundance. Eventually I moved to a bookshelf and began to peruse its contents. As I grew bolder, I climbed ladders and metal spiral stairways to access the upper levels. I kept finding books that were simply too tempting and fascinating to leave behind—books on economics and management, books about history and social development, books filled with romantic encounters and fanciful tales. I piled them all on a table near the door, until the stack reached my eye level.

"I think that's enough," I said, patting the spines. I certainly couldn't carry them all to my room on the third floor, so I had to pick several of the most toothsome volumes and leave the rest for later.

Pleasantly burdened with books, I approached the candelabra my host had pointed to earlier. I cleared my throat and said awkwardly, "Would you mind escorting me to my room?"

The candelabra quirked one of its branches and its flames guttered slightly before flaring again. It hopped off the table to a chair arm, and from there to the floor. I followed as it bounced through the door, which Everston had left ajar.

We mounted a staircase so immense I felt like a tiny elf creeping through a giant's house. I remembered the way to the rooms where I'd bathed and dressed, but it was nice to have the merry glow of the candles, to feel that there was something sentient in this enormous gloomy place besides me and my serpentine host.

And what of the poor brute out in the gardens? I hadn't asked Everston about him, because the sorcerer seemed to dislike too many

questions. And then of course both of us had gotten—distracted.

But I was mightily curious about the brothers—their relationship and their curse.

I hadn't liked the way the furniture and animated items worked together to close the kitchen door against my will. I could have run outside if I had really wanted to speak to the bull-man—but I'd been afraid I might not get back into the castle.

The time I saw the bull-man again, I would have questions ready. I would demand answers, from both him and his brother.

Once I entered my room, the candelabra bowed slightly to me and hopped away again. Going by what Everston had told me, the light fixture had once been a human servant or a guard. With a shock I wondered if the magically animated razor I used in the bath had also once been human. I'd allowed it to shave my legs and my—my nether regions—I shivered at the thought. I wasn't sure if I felt more embarrassment for myself or pity for the object that had once been a person, now reduced to such low tasks.

A black nightdress had been laid out on the bed for me. It was beautifully designed, if rather revealing. The neckline swept low, barely concealing my nipples, and there were sheer lace panels in very suggestive places. I put it on, blushing as I thought of going down to breakfast in it the next morning. Perhaps Everston would spread me on the breakfast table and feast on my pussy again. I closed my eyes blissfully at the thought of that pliant forked tongue of his.

Before falling asleep, I was determined to read a few pages of a large volume on economics. But the struggles and pains of the long, long day caught up to me quickly. The last thing I remembered was keeling over onto the pillows, letting the book fall shut on the big bed beside me.

Sometime in the night I woke, sweating and frantic, my nightdress clinging to my skin. I had the feeling that something had woken me—a sound, perhaps.

Thrashing my feet out of the covers, I padded to the door of my room. I hadn't locked it—a significant oversight in such a place, with such a monstrous host. But he had already promised not to harm me; and if he changed his mind, a lock would not keep him out

of my room. He probably had a key, and if not, he could use magic to dispose of any obstacles in his path.

I stepped out of my room and wandered a little way along the corridor, listening for any more sounds. The hall was draped in black shadows, its ceiling disappearing high above me, shrouded in darkness. Several doors ahead, a single lamp glowed in a sconce, pouring golden light against the smooth plaster. I crept toward the light, like a night insect drawn to a flame.

And then, behind me, I heard a sound—a scuffle of paws, a snorting of breath. Terror clutched my soul.

Clenching my teeth, I revolved slowly and saw, emerging from the blackness, the hulking shape and red eyes of a welaway.

A welaway, here in the castle.

I didn't know how it had gotten in, nor did I spend time wondering about it.

I ran.

I couldn't return to my room—the welaway was closer to that doorway than I was—so I fled to the central stairs and pelted up them as fast as I could go. I had a vague notion of finding my host and begging for his help and protection. He had magic—surely he could destroy the demonic creature.

Up I climbed, fast as I could, while my thighs burned and my breath huffed quick and frantic from my lungs.

At the fourth-floor landing, I glanced back and saw the welaway scrambling up the dark steps after me, a nightmare silhouette of fur and twisted limbs and rolling eyes. It snarled, champing its contorted muzzle.

Too terrified to scream, I leaped ahead, up the next flight of steps. The fifth floor was off limits, Everston had said. He'd kill me if I went there. But the demon behind me frightened me more than he did.

I charged up the last few steps. The fifth-floor hallway extended into darkness to my right and my left, but two pale lamps glowed at the head of the staircase, so I had a little light.

My legs shook, and my heart throbbed so hard I feared it might burst. I staggered to the large doors opposite the stairway and yanked on their handles.

Locked.

"Everston!" I gasped, a breathy shriek. "Help me!"

I glanced back one more time as I fled down the right-hand passage. The welaway gave a hunching scramble and cleared the last of the steps. It started running, its crooked legs gobbling up the distance between us.

"Everston!" I banged on another door, then thrust my shoulder against it while twisting the handle.

The door gave way, spilling me into a room as black as a cave, black as spilled ink.

I slammed the door shut behind me and scrabbled around for a bolt. My fingers found a latch, and I jammed it into place.

The welaway crashed into the door, which rattled violently. The creature yelped at the pain of the impact.

"How?" I sobbed. "How, how did that thing get in here?"

I shrank from the door, hands pressed to my mouth, and I waited.

Though my eyes were open, I could see nothing. The space around me smelled stuffy and close, like an attic room full of musty fabrics and upholstery. After several minutes, I began to move cautiously around, fingers outstretched. I touched the spindle of a bedpost, the textured fabric of a quilt. A few steps away there was a piece of furniture—a dresser, with round smooth drawer pulls.

No sound of scuffling feet, no more attempts on the bedroom door. Had the welaway left?

I inched back toward where I thought the door was and waited several more minutes. Then I fumbled around until I found the latch, eased it back, and opened the door a sliver.

Nothing.

I widened the crack until I could put my head out and look around.

The hallway was empty in both directions.

Everston had to be up here somewhere. If I could find him, I could tell him about the welaway. He could protect me.

Breathing shallowly, I left the musty bedroom and inched along the corridor, keeping my back to the wall.

"Everston, where are you?" I whispered.

I didn't expect an answer. I certainly didn't expect something to tap against my bare foot.

When I looked down, a hand mirror of pearl and gold was bumping gently against my ankle. Its reflective surface bore two jagged cracks right through the center, and I wondered briefly how such damage would reflect in a human body if this object were ever changed back to its original form.

"Can you take me to Everston?" I asked.

The hand mirror began to roll and hop down the corridor, so I followed cautiously. My eyes kept darting into the shadows above, beside, and behind me. No sign of the welaway.

The hand mirror took me down a second corridor. This one was uplit by a faint green glow, which emanated from double doors halfway along the passage.

The green glow was a sure sign of magic, and of my mysterious host.

Emboldened, I hurried to the doors and tried to open one. It yielded easily, and I felt the faint buzzing crackle of magic pass over my skin as I entered. Whatever magical shield the sorcerer had put in place to guard the entrance, it didn't seem to work on me.

The space I entered was dimly lit by the same green glow. It was more of a nest than a powerful sorcerer's bedroom. The floor was cluttered with objects—some of them half-formed or misshapen, perhaps the product of magic gone wrong. Thick iron chains and delicate necklaces draped over wooden trunks and moth-eaten sofas. Bookshelves canted against each other, spilling their contents onto tables that tilted against overstuffed chairs. There were piles of brocades and velvet, rolls of cottony batting, mounds of pillows. Between the soft stuffs, weapons jutted sharp—spears and maces and delicate rapiers, unsheathed. Strings of beads and glittering masks dripped from a discarded chandelier in the corner.

I had never seen such a beautiful and dangerous hoard. It was soft and supple, sharp and perilous. The nest of my monstrous, serpentine host. The hand mirror bumped my ankle on its way past me. It bobbed forward, nudging a largish lump under a plush blanket. Was my host under there?

"Everston?" I whispered.

He must be a sound sleeper. After all, he hadn't roused during my encounter with the welaway. I might have to be a bit more forceful.

I closed the bedroom door behind me and stepped forward.

"Everston?" I said, louder.

The blanket twitched. Encouraged, I spoke his name again. "Everston."

The blankets exploded, and the sorcerer erupted from his nest with a furious scream.

"How dare you disturb me here?" His voice was more than a bellow, more than a shout—it was a high, keening, uncontrollable vomit of pure rage. "Get out, get out, get out!" He picked up a chair and hurled it at me. I barely dodged in time.

"There's a welaway in the castle," I cried. "It was chasing me—"

"Out!" Spit blasted between his ridges of sharp teeth, and he leaped for me, claws extended.

Sobbing, I ran from the room. I fled down the hall to the steps, wobbling precariously on my weary legs. The sorcerer followed me, bellowing about how I wasn't supposed to come into his rooms, how he'd been saving them for someone, how he should never have trusted me.

I gripped the banister and started down the main staircase, but the steps shifted and flattened beneath me, and the whole thing turned into a glossy wooden slide that shunted me fast, fast, and faster toward the first floor. I screamed, because I knew this breakneck speed could only end in my death.

But a line of pillows came hopping out of the parlor and formed a barrier at the foot of the slide, cushioning me and slowing my speed. The instant my body stopped spinning across the marble floor, I lurched to my feet and hurried toward the kitchen.

As I limped across the flagstones of the kitchen, the broom from earlier tried to bar my access to the back door. I knocked the broom aside, hauled the door open, and passed through.

Magic buzzed over me again as I left the castle, but I barely gave it a thought. I ran out into the night, into the gloomy gardens, sobs of terror hitching in my throat.



Something nudged me awake—one of the sentient garden rakes who helped me tend my vegetables. From the shaky letters he'd scratched in the dirt one day, just after the curse happened, I knew this particular rake was Elbris, formerly a royal gardener, every bit as much of a philanderer as Everston and I had been. He had crafted innumerable secret corners and bowers throughout the gardens and the maze around the castle—places he never told my parents about, places where princes, gardeners, and any other charming men with a willing partner might find a quiet spot to enjoy themselves.

Elbris never bothered me at night, so when I realized it was him, I sat up immediately. He hopped frantically on his tines and then bounced out the door of my cottage. I always left it open—no point in shutting it when nothing could get into our domain except poor wandering girls.

Shaking my ponderous head to clear the sleep from my brain, I clomped after the rake. He lurched along a garden path, turning left or right a couple of times. He hesitated at a crossroads between paths, hopping uncertainly across the dirt.

"Why did you wake me, fool?" I rumbled. But my irritation died immediately as I glimpsed the imprint of a bare foot on the path.

The girl.

My head snapped up, and I inhaled deeply, drawing in the scent of night-blooming flowers, dewy vegetation, and dark loam. I could smell prickly cedar hedges, aromatic spices and herbs, damp rotting wood. Through all those familiar scents wound another fragrance, faint and enticing, soft and floral, with undertones of something bittersweet, like a dry wine. Everston's magic clung to the girl's

body like a second skin, like the outgrown translucent shell an insect might try to slough off.

Judging by the distance between her footprints, the girl was running.

I pounded after her, my hooves thundering against the dirt, an echo of my tempestuous heartbeat.

She must have heard me coming, because when I broke into the next garden square, I could smell her more strongly. She was somewhere very close by.

All around me stood marble statues, figures from our storybooks—dragons and gnomes, winged Fae and thorny goblins. I hadn't spent much time grooming this area of the gardens—too many sweetly painful memories of our childhoods. Ivy and moss draped thickly over the white and ebony limbs of the creatures.

Something rustled near the statue of a Fae woman with upswept wings. The ivy stirred, silvered by the moonlight. I caught a glimpse of a bare white leg, its small foot arched, poised to flee.

The girl was standing on the statue's pedestal, hiding behind it.

Chuffing to clear the grit of disuse from my throat, I said, "I will not hurt you. You can come down."

The girl peeked out from behind the statue. Her golden hair swung out, and the night breeze caught it, whisking it playfully around her face. Her eyes shone wide and terrified.

"I just want somewhere safe to sleep." Her voice was tremulous. "I'm so tired."

"But—the house—" I said blankly. "There are rooms, beds—"

Her lips tightened and she shook her head. Slowly more of her emerged from behind the statue, and I nearly choked. She wore a black nightdress that scooped low across her breasts, with lacy panels that offered tantalizing glimpses of pale skin.

"I can't go back there," she said. "Your brother—Everston—he scared me. There was a welaway in the castle, and when I ran to him for help, he—he screamed at me. I thought he might kill me."

"A welaway in the castle?" I repeated stupidly. "Not possible. Nothing can get in here except unattached young women."

She arched an eyebrow. "Well, that's disturbing. But I assure you, there was a welaway. In the castle. Right outside my room. It chased me up to the fifth floor, and that's when Everston snapped. To be fair, he told me the fifth floor was off limits, but that's no excuse for the violence of his rage. And after he—after I—" She bit her lip, looking away from me.

I stared at her in shock. Women never ran from Everston like this. Maybe they did inside the house—I'd heard slamming doors more than once—but never before had one of them run *to me*.

Maybe the girl had imagined the welaway. She'd been through enough trauma, gods knew. It was possible her weary mind had created the nightmare out of shadows and dust.

But the longer I looked at her, the more certain I was that she'd hallucinated nothing, invented nothing. Something, some creature, had frightened her—and that was a concern I'd have to investigate. If anything *had* made it through Andralia's cursed barrier, maybe it meant the barrier was weakening.

Maybe we could find a way out.

"We can't do anything about it at night," I said gruffly. "You may come to my place and rest. In the morning we can figure it out."

She climbed down from the pedestal, flashing the entire length of her beautiful legs and a hint of her pussy at me in the process. She snatched the hem of the nightdress down and threw me a sharp glance.

I'd not seen that much of a woman's skin in years. The sight of it turned me hard instantly.

My reaction was neither my fault nor hers. It simply *was*. I would suppress it, but it would take a few moments.

As usual, I was naked, and while the thatch of shaggy fur across my stomach and thighs usually disguised my privates, my reaction to her was rather—obvious. I set my back to her quickly and trotted off into the maze, trusting her to follow.

To settle myself, I began to repeat the long list of plants I cultivated in the garden, along with the specific amounts of sun and shade and water they needed. I enjoyed reciting such lists—grounding myself with numbers and measurements and plans.

Numbers never lied. They did not change depending on emotions or magic. Mathematics was an eternal constant, more reliable than women, my brother, the Fae—steadier and stronger than me.

By the time I'd led the girl to my cottage, my lust had subsided, at least long enough for me to snatch a scrap piece of canvas and tie it around my hindquarters.

I hated that Everston had been granted a mouth, not a muzzle. His was a monster's mouth, yes, but he had lips that were more or less human-like, while mine were entirely bestial. And he had a dick about the same size as that of a human, while mine was that of a bull, enormous and grotesque.

No wonder Everston had decided to give himself the best chance of finding love with our guests. With my disgusting head and giant cock, I wasn't even a contender.

My cottage was dark, so with my wolf-like paws I tried to light a lamp that Everston had deigned to give me. The oil in it was old, but probably still good, and I had sulfur matches.

But my paws were used to poking around in dirt, not lighting lamps. I broke the first two matches, and with the third I managed to set my fur on fire.

I swore as grievously as the girl herself had done when that confounded broom shut the kitchen door and separated us.

One second my paw was alight, the blaze consuming my fur with frightening speed—and the next second the girl had seized the water bucket from the table and plunged my paw into it. The flames died with a hiss.

The feel of her fingers wrapped around my hairy forearm—it was mesmerizing. Despite the pain of my scorched paw, I felt a spike of heart-wrenching pleasure.

I had not been touched in a century. Not by a human, anyway. Jostles and taps from the animated garden implements didn't count.

The soul-cracking shock of that touch broke me, and I jerked away from the girl, pulling my injured paw against my chest.

The girl surveyed me for a second, then took up the matches and lit the lamp herself. She held it high, scanning the tiny cottage. "You live here? While *he* has all *that*?" She nodded in the direction of the castle.

I grunted in answer. "Sleep." I pointed to the pile of worn-out blankets and animal skins.

I thought she might turn up her nose, but she flung herself onto the pile without any complaints about the texture or the smell.

"The beds in the castle are so luxurious," she said. "Almost too fine for someone like me. I'm used to a straw pallet and a couple of thin blankets. My father and sisters took all the finest bedclothes."

My heart swelled with the desire to give her the most beautiful bed imaginable. But I had no magic for such things, only the prosaic limited magic that my paws and the good earth could produce.

"Hmm," I grunted. From a nearby chest I dragged an old cloak I sometimes used on the coldest days, when my hot blood and my fur weren't enough to warm me. It was crafted of wolf pelts, lined with threadbare scarlet silk.

I nodded to Elbris the rake, who was still bobbing anxiously outside. Then I pulled the cottage door shut, threw the cloak down near the doorway, and settled myself on it, with my burnt paw curled to my chest. In this position my body lay across the entrance, and nothing would be able to disturb the girl without my knowledge.

"Should we bandage that?" The girl nodded to my injury.

"It will heal," I growled. "Sleep."

"I'm not sure I can," she said softly. "What if the welaway comes here? What if it tries to get in?"

"I will kill it."

"Could you? They're very strong."

"I'm stronger."

"But how do you know, if they never come within the walls of this place?"

Good point. I'd only seen the creatures at a distance, lurking in the woods beyond our domain's impassable gates.

I loosed a low, rumbling growl. But instead of being cowed, the girl chuckled quietly.

"You don't really know that you're any stronger. But it's a good sign that you'd be willing to try your luck against one. Just one more thing—what's your name?"

I unearthed my name from the dusty caverns of my mind and held it on my tongue. For some reason I wasn't sure I wanted her to have it. Releasing it felt like giving her a part of me, something I hadn't shared in a long time.

"I'm Lyrical," she said helpfully. "And of course I've met Everston."

I didn't like the way she said his name—sad and soft, almost caressing. As if he'd already wedged his way into her heart.

"I'd like to know your name too," she pressed. "Seems only fair."

I snorted. "Nothing here is fair."

"From what I've seen, I agree. If you'd rather not tell me your name, it's all right. But thank you for letting me stay here."

Gratitude, from this wisp of a woman whom I had chased and my brother had traumatized? I nearly choked on my surprise and grief. This girl was far too sweet and noble a spirit to be entombed here with us.

"You're a fool to thank me," I said.

"And why is that? Do you have plans to harm me while I sleep?"
"No."

"You've given me your bed and promised to protect me. That's worthy of my thanks."

I rumbled in reply, and the girl released a soft, weary laugh. "You don't talk much, do you?"

"No one comes here."

"But your brother mentioned other guests."

"All women," I growled. "And they all go to him. The roses lead them to his door."

"Can you explain what's going on here, or are you bound to secrecy about the curse?"

When the curse first began, Everston and I had agreed not to divulge the details to any of our guests. "Knowing that they must fall in love with one of us will only make them lock up their hearts tighter," Everston had reasoned, and I'd agreed.

Of course I hadn't known then that he intended to be the only one wooing the women.

He'd had enough chances to try his strategy. Now it was my turn. I had no hope the girl could love me, but I did take a perverse pleasure in the thought that I could prevent her from falling for Everston. Although it seemed he was doing a fair job of turning her off himself, with his bouts of uncontrollable rage.

"We are trapped here until a woman professes her true love for one of us," I said. "The one she chooses will regain human form, along with all our servants and guards. The other brother will remain a beast forever."

In the dark I heard her inhale sharply. "That's so cruel. And it explains why the two of you are at odds with each other. Who would put such a curse on you?"

But I was not ready to tell that tale. It held my deepest shame, my worst sin.

I was about to tell her to shut up and sleep, but a throat-ripping screech from just outside the cottage door drowned the words.

The girl was right.

A welaway had come for us.

"Be still," I told the girl. "And be quiet, if you can manage that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked indignantly. "Are you saying I talk too much?"

I snarled in answer and prowled to the door. My ears twitched toward the heavy footfalls of the creature pacing outside.

With a resounding crash, the demon flung itself at the door, and the walls of the cottage shook. Despite my efforts at repair, ninetynine years hadn't been kind to the structure.

Again the welaway hurled itself at the door, and the wood cracked and splintered.

I swore and braced myself for the next impact, which would surely bring the door down.

With a smash and a snapping of planks, the welaway crashed into the room with us. The girl did not scream, but she gave a little chirp of terror, like a songbird whose nest is threatened. *Songbird*. My mind assigned her the name, even as I launched myself at the welaway, my jaws open wide.

I might have a bull's head, but I had a wolf's fangs.

I sank my teeth into the demon's shoulder, and for a second my eyes rolled back in my head because the sensation of fangs plunging through hot flesh was pure relief. The beast inside me had wanted to *bite* something for so long. And finally, here was a creature I could kill without remorse.

Savagely I ripped a chunk of muscle out of the demon, and it howled, snapping at me with a deformed muzzle that was split at the center, splayed wide and double-tongued. Five eyes dotted its skull, each one a different color and shape.

Pain blazed along my ribs as the welaway's claws ripped me down to the bone. I felt hot blood spilling out of me as the demon bore me down to the floor. It pawed frantically deeper and deeper into my chest like a dog digging a hole. I felt my sternum crack and my stomach split. The agony immobilized me—for a moment I couldn't react, couldn't fight back.

The girl did scream then, and she threw something, which struck the demon's eyes. It screeched, its head whipping up to stare at her. Then it sprang—but as it flew over my head I jabbed upward with both sets of claws and raked its belly open.

Putrid gore flooded out of the creature, splattering onto the floorboards.

With a choking splutter the welaway turned back to me, its jaws gnashing. I struggled to my feet, sucking ragged breaths through my destroyed chest cavity.

The girl grabbed a hoe and jammed it through the creature's spine, her anguished yell ringing in my ears. I leaned forward, and with the last of my strength I seized the demon's head and twisted.

Crack.

The neck snapped, and the creature slumped to the floor in a puddle of its own ooze.

"Oh gods," breathed the girl. "Oh gods, look at you." She covered her mouth with shaking hands, and for a moment I thought she might faint—but then she snatched up three of the thin blankets from

my nest and ran to me. "Lie down. Let me try to stop the—the bleeding—oh no. No."

She stared at my chest and stomach, at the protruding shards of bone and the glistening entrails bulging through my shredded muscles.

"This is all my fault," she whispered. "You'll die because of me."

I turned and stumbled away from her, through the broken door of the cottage into the chilly night. I didn't want to spend my healing time inhaling the reek of the demon. I'd much rather be out among my plants.

The girl followed me, chirping anxiously, begging me to lie down. I kept stumbling along until I reached my rock garden, where I'd cultivated a thick bed of moss for afternoon naps. I collapsed there, limbs splayed, huffing wet breaths through my muzzle. All I could taste was blood and bile.

She bent over me, trying to press the blankets to my wounds.

"No," I wheezed. "Let it be."

Her face was dappled with starlight and shadow, but I could make out the tears glittering on her cheeks.

She was crying for me, a monster she had just met.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

"I will heal."

"What?"

"We cannot die. It is part of our torment."

"Thank Nehalennia!" she choked, and burst into louder sobs. Her breath misted in the cool air.

The night was too cold for her, scantily dressed as she was. Awkwardly I clutched the blankets she held and tried to drag them over her shoulders.

"Stop, stop," she protested between sobs. "You'll hurt yourself worse." She wrapped the blankets around herself and scooted closer to me, still sniffling. "It's cold, but it's not as cold as I expected. Beyond the walls it's the dead of winter, but here, things are still growing—flowers and such."

"The magic," I wheezed. "It has a strange effect."

"Sshhh. Don't try to talk. Rest." She wiped her nose on the corner of a blanket. "How long will your healing take?"

"You told me—not to talk." The words garbled in my blood-filled throat.

"Oh yes. I'm so sorry." She darted another glance at my raw wounds and winced. "Should we try to ask your brother for refuge in the castle? What if there are more welaways around here? We're out in the open. Anything could get us."

"He won't let me in." I closed my eyes. "Leave if you want."

"I'd rather stay with you. Do you mind if I lie down here too? I'm so tired. And if another welaway shows up, I'd rather not die alone."

She didn't wait for a reply, but lay down right next to me, with her head nearly in my armpit and her body parallel to mine.

As if she felt safe with me.

What a foolish little songbird.



When my eyes opened, I felt so deliciously comfortable I did not want to move.

The sun pressed warmly on my cheek, and the air was sweetly fresh, faintly spiced. There was also a scent of savory warmth, of male richness.

My eyes flew open.

The first thing I saw was an expanse of beautifully ridged abdominal muscles, leading down to furred hips wrapped in a ragged canvas garment.

The bull-man was completely healed—not a hint of the horrific carnage from last night.

And my cheek was pillowed on the soft fur coating his upper chest.

I wanted to lurch upright and skitter away from him, but—well, I was so damn comfortable. And his arm was draped over my waist, heavy and warm.

The steady swell and sink of his chest told me he was deeply asleep. When had I crawled onto him? I didn't remember deciding to use him as a pillow.

A pair of translucent white butterflies flitted across my line of vision, twirling with each other in an intricate dance, their wings glowing with morning sunshine.

Cautiously I shifted my hips, and the beast's arm slipped away from my body, onto the moss. I sat up, raking my fingers through my hair. It was damp with dew, but not too badly tangled.

A faint, satisfied soreness between my legs served as a bittersweet reminder of what I'd done last night. Not a dream, then. I had let him fuck me. My host—part-dragon, part-serpent, part man—a sorcerer with a terrifyingly volatile temper—I'd let him pleasure me and come inside me.

And then he'd screamed at me. Threatened to kill me. He'd almost done it, too.

Apparently I'd lost my good judgment when I was sold by my family, chased by welaways, and influenced by magical roses. I must try to do better.

Getting to my feet, I stared down at the monster who had protected me, the monster with the head of a bull, curved horns, and shaggy shoulders. Clawed wolf's paws lay outspread and relaxed against the moss. He had the legs of a bull, too, jointed wrongly for a man of his height. Last night he had moved surprisingly well considering those awkward limbs.

The only human pieces of him were his chest and stomach, and the upper parts of his arms. I tried to imagine what he had looked like before he was cursed—a hundred years ago, Everston had said. But it was impossible to picture features I'd never seen.

Gleams of sunlight turned the bull-man's dark fur to red-brown in places, and a faint breeze rippled across it, shifting the strands. His broad velvety nose flexed with each breath. While I watched, his long eyelashes lifted, revealing dark eyes.

"Good morning," I said, smiling.

He snarled, one paw drifting across his chest and abdomen. His claws scraped lightly over his skin, checking his flesh.

"You did heal." I grinned at him. "It's amazing. Could this magic be used to help the ill or injured throughout the kingdom?"

"It is Fae magic," he growled. "Their good deeds are always paired with evil."

"Fae magic? You mean the Fae *exist*?" My jaw dropped. "I thought they were only stories, or that they were extinct!"

"Most have withdrawn to their own realm," he said. "But a few still wander the world—or they did, a century ago."

He pulled himself upright, and the sheer height and bulk of him cowed me for a second. I swallowed, feeling tiny and weak.

The bull-man looked down at me, perhaps thinking along similar lines, about how weak I was. I clenched my teeth and stared back at him, defiant.

"You're a good fighter," he said brusquely. "And you're brave. I won't say you saved my life, because I can't die, but—you helped."

My pulse quickened. Yesterday and today I'd received the first compliments anyone had paid me in years—well, the only compliments that weren't lustful remarks about my beauty.

Yesterday Everston had praised my intelligence. And the bull-man had just praised my courage and fighting instinct.

After years of thankless toil keeping my family together, and after years of begging and serving and scraping for every coin—to be recognized for my wit and strength, not just my beauty—it was overwhelming.

I bit my lips, trying to keep the tears from welling out.

The bull-man rumbled low in his chest, a sound of consternation. "That was a compliment. Did I not do it right?"

"No, you did it exactly right. No one has said anything nice about me in a very long time." I whisked a few stray tears from my cheeks and lashes.

"I don't believe you."

I glared at him. "I don't lie."

"I only mean that a woman as beautiful as you must get compliments often."

"A woman beautiful and rich might receive tasteful compliments. But a woman beautiful and poor receives the kind of compliments she'd rather not hear," I said. "I'm used to comments about my breasts and my ass, how men want to nuzzle or squeeze them—or about my mouth, and what men want to put into it. They want to twist my hair in their fists, rut into me like hogs, spill their seed down my throat. I'm familiar with compliments like that."

My face burned as I spoke. I'd never said such things aloud before, to anyone. But the pain of all those lecherous remarks simply burst out of me before I could stop it. Perhaps the exhaustion, injury, and terror I'd been through had worn my inhibitions dangerously thin. Perhaps that was why I'd yielded my body so readily to Everston.

The bull-man regarded me, and though his features weren't human, I found to my surprise that I could read him. I could perceive the shame, anger, guilt, and revulsion warring in his eyes.

"Men are beasts," was all he said.

"There we can agree."

He grunted, then said roughly, abruptly, "My name is Caswell."

The bull-man's sudden confession of his name felt weighty, significant, like a jewel entrusted to me.

"Caswell," I repeated. "It's nice to meet you."

His great shaggy head dipped, a nod of acknowledgment. "My brother frightened you badly," he said. "But you are the first to ever run out of the castle. I always thought Everston had magic in place to keep the girls inside, to keep them from entering the gardens."

"He kept them prisoner?"

Caswell rumbled his assent. "He only let them promenade on the balconies and rooftops, never in the gardens or the maze. I believe once they plucked one of his roses and entered the castle, they were confined by his magic."

I frowned, thinking back to the odd buzz I felt when I raced out the kitchen door. "Maybe he did put magical barriers around the castle. Maybe I'm immune to them."

Caswell's expressive gaze intensified. "If you are immune to magical barriers, maybe you can get out of here. You can leave this place."

"Maybe." But the momentary flare of excitement dissipated almost at once, leaving me colder than the winter woods beyond the walls.

"What is it?" he grunted.

"My family sold me. I only escaped the slavers because the welaways attacked. If I go back home, even if the welaways don't get me on the way, it's only a matter of time before my father and my sisters try to sell me again."

"Sell you?" His brown lips hitched up, revealing sharp fangs. "Why would your family sell you?"

"Because I'm the youngest? Because they are too immersed in their own desires to care about anyone else?" I laughed, short and hard. "I haven't really let myself think about it too long. If I do, I might curl up into a ball and roll into some dark hole and never come out again."

"Mm," he rumbled. And somehow, that single sound expressed his understanding. He knew exactly how I felt, because his brother had betrayed him. His own flesh and blood had turned him out of the home they once shared and blocked him from trying to break the curse.

"You chased me through the maze because you wanted a chance," I said slowly. "You were trying to make contact with me before Everston did."

He chuffed in response, his hoof toeing a clump of loose dirt.

"Why didn't you try harder? You could have caught up to me."

"Doesn't matter," he growled. "We should check the perimeter and find out how the welaway got inside. Find out if you can leave this accursed place."

When he turned and trotted off through the garden, I followed, though I was not eager to leave just yet. I liked puzzles and problems to unravel, mysteries to solve. Despite my injuries and exhaustion, despite all the dangers I'd encountered since I arrived, I couldn't imagine going back to my dull little life of odd jobs and penny-saving, being sneered at by my older sisters and suppressed by my father.

In my former life I was used to being subservient to others, reacting carefully when my questions annoyed them, apologizing profusely when I did something stupid, expressing abundant gratitude for any scraps of kindness or generosity that the townspeople deigned to show me.

So far I'd used that same grateful civility with the two beastbrothers, but they seemed surprised and confused by it. I had the sense that with them, I could push the boundaries, let the hidden parts of myself unfold a bit more. I could be bolder. I had been unthinkably bold last night, with Everston. He and I had connected on some level—and then my intrusion into his rooms had spoiled it all.

Frowning, I trudged after Caswell, focusing on the slope of his broad back, eyeing the tuft of fur at the end of his brown tail.

I felt a connection to him too, and it frightened me.



When we got to the wall, I opened one of the gates and tried to walk through it, into the woods beyond. But the magic surrounding the grounds wasn't Everston's doing—it was a Faerie's work. It blocked me like a physical force whenever I tried to pass through any of the garden exits.

At my request, Caswell boosted me up to the top of the wall. I tried to swing down from there to the turf beyond, but the air in front of me felt solid and tangible, an invisible wall just as impassable as the stone one.

When I shoved against the barrier, it sparked and threw me backward. Caswell caught me in his massive arms before I hit the ground.

He didn't put me down immediately. He held me, his grip tightening slightly. Half-curled in his arms, pressed to his broad chest, I could hear the frantic thunder of his heart. That rhythmic proof of my effect on him made my stomach dip and thrill.

I reached up, patting the furry cheek of his bull's head. "Thank you."

"You keep thanking me," he growled. I watched the movement of his muzzle, the champ of his unexpectedly sharp teeth. Those were not the teeth of a herbivore.

"You deserve my gratitude," I said quietly.

"You should be running from me and screaming," he said, setting me down. "I'm worse than my brother."

I frowned. "I very much doubt that."

A low rumble of dissent rolled from his chest, and he turned away, but not before I saw a deep sadness settle over his beastly features.

"What is it?" I said. "What is this unforgivable thing you've done? Have you killed someone?"

"I have wanted to," he replied.

"You've wanted to kill Everston?" I guessed.

"Him, and others. The women who have passed through this garden. There's a hunger that accompanies this form—a craving for flesh."

My stomach thrilled again, but he added, "A hunger for living meat."

"Oh," I breathed. "So—you want to eat me?"

His massive paw clamped around the leg of a nearby stone statue, and I saw bits of rock crumbling and sifting away under the force of his grip. "No."

For a long moment we both stood mute and still, while his shoulders heaved with labored breath and his fingers ground deeper into the stone. Finally he said, "Come. We'll keep looking."

We explored the entire perimeter of the grounds, but neither Caswell nor I could find any sign of weakness or infiltration. All the gates were shut and locked, the spellwork seemed impenetrable, and there were no holes or cracks in the walls.

"There is only one possibility left," Caswell said. "The welaway entered this place through the castle itself, by some secret passage." He snorted angrily. "That means my brother has another way in or out, and he did not tell me."

He stomped along the path, his hooves kicking up puffs of dirt and dust.

"Maybe there's some other explanation," I said, patting his arm.

I intended to pacify or comfort him, but he jerked away and rounded on me, his eyes blazing. His bullish nostrils flared, showing their velvety red lining. "Stop touching me, woman."

"I'm only trying to be your friend."

"You're not my friend. You're an invader, a vagabond, a slave discarded by her own family, and, I suspect, a whore of my brother's. Why would I want you as a friend?"

The words stung, but I knew their source. Both of these manmonsters had been in terrible pain for a long time, and like wounded animals, they cringed and snapped at the one trying to help them.

Steeling myself, I reached out again, laying my hand on his chest this time. He went absolutely rigid—I could feel the rage and shock radiating from his taut muscles.

I shifted my fingers, stroking the soft abundant hair coating his pectorals. My fingertips grazed the tight bud of a large nipple.

Caswell's paw clamped around my wrist. "Don't play with the monster, Songbird."

His warning echoed in my mind, but I brushed it away, because I had felt this kind of perilous excitement only once in my life—last night, when I lay on the table in the library, bare and open for Everston's use.

He'd seemed kind then, and passionate, and lonely. Even when he'd lashed out at me on the way to the library, he hadn't frightened me.

But the wild shriek that had ripped from his throat when I stepped into his room—that had been terrifying.

I'd yielded myself to Everston, impulsively, not knowing what kind of person he was. And now I was feeling the same scintillating, reckless arousal toward Caswell that I'd felt toward his brother. "Whore" might not be far off the mark.

Don't play with the monster, Songbird.

Perhaps the monster was my own lust, after all.

Caswell moved my palm away from his chest. His paw practically vibrated with restrained power, with the kind of crushing force that could shatter the frail bones of my wrist. His bull's face was fearsome, glowering at me, but the planes of his stomach sucked in, quick and rhythmic, betraying his own excitement.

Some reckless part of me wanted to push him further, to find out if playing with him could be as fun as playing with Everston had been. I'd had a taste of lust, of ecstasy, and my untethered heart wanted more, wanted something—a body against mine, a fresh surge of delight.

"If I can't touch you, how am I supposed to fall in love with you?" I said, my mouth tweaking in a half-smile.

Caswell seized my other wrist. A sound that was half-bellow, half-groan broke from him, and he drove me backward against a nearby tree—an enormous one, over a century old, with knotty protruding roots. My back hit the trunk and I gasped as Caswell pinned my wrists to the rough bark.

"Do not joke about that to me." His deep voice shook. "I know there is no chance. You could never love *this*—not my soul or my skin. I am not worth loving. So please—don't speak of breaking the curse, when there is no hope."

His muzzle was a hands-breath from my face, and the breath emanating from it smelled like earth and blood, with a sulfurous tinge.

I turned my face away from the unpleasant scent, and Caswell released my arms, backing off. So much self-hatred and sorrow roiled in his dark eyes that my heart lurched with pity.

"I shouldn't have said that," I told him. "I wasn't thinking."

"It's forgiven," he muttered. "And I crave your forgiveness, too, for the words I spoke in anger. For calling you a whore. It was wicked of me."

"It's all right."

"Let us go to the kitchen door. It's not the appointed time, but I have a feeling my brother will be there, wanting to speak with you."

"Can't he come out into the gardens?" I asked. "Or do the magical barriers keep him inside the castle too?"

"He used to come out, decades ago, back when he planted the roses," Caswell replied. "But he has not left those walls in a long time. Perhaps his own magic restricts him as much as it does the women."

"Maybe he's afraid to encounter you," I said. "He probably knows it would lead to a fight, so he avoids it."

We turned onto a path paved with white stones, set neatly in an interlocking pattern. The borders of the path were neat but not

perfect, balanced between wild nature and cultivated form. The garden beds beyond were deep and lush, with artistically selected plants that complemented each other, with just enough contrast to be interesting. This garden was the work of a skilled artist as well as a meticulous herbologist.

"Did you do all this?" I asked Caswell.

He mumbled something and gave a half-nod.

"It's beautiful. You're very talented."

"Hmm."

The longer I looked at the gardens, the more of him I could see. He'd written himself across every section of the grounds, from the soft embrace of the mossy beds in the rock garden to the limpid pools of a water garden we'd passed earlier. He was the cracked statuary draped in ivy, sorrowful and neglected. He was the passionate, abundant florals blooming along the white stone path, yearning toward us in an explosion of effusive color. He was the crisply trimmed columns of juniper with their pointed peaks, and the fruit trees heavy with juicy offerings.

Admiration swelled in my soul as I saw everything he had made, as I imagined this bullish, brutal creature hunched over a garden bed, nurturing tiny fragile plants with his enormous paws. The thought sent a quiver of affection straight through my heart.

"This place is an achievement to be proud of," I said softly. "You created it, never expecting anyone to see it."

"I like to stay busy."

"So do L"

He looked at me, his steps slowing. "It keeps away the darkness."

"It does." My throat felt tight, and my nerves thrummed with tension.

We'd stopped walking.

I wanted to tug the thread between us and see where it would lead—but now that we stood still, I felt twinges of pain from my bruises, especially the ones on my breasts.

Gingerly I touched the area, wincing as my fingertips probed sore spots.

Caswell noticed immediately. "You're hurt. And I've made you sleep on the ground and walk all over the gardens this morning, without food, water, or rest. I am a despicable wretch." He said the last words in a dark, angry growl.

"You're not," I said. "But I think I should rest, and eat."

"I'll take you to the kitchen." He swept me up in his great arms before I could protest. "Everston will conjure you a fine breakfast."

"He won't," I said. "He's probably furious with me for invading his space and then running away."

"And I am angry with *him*," rumbled Caswell. He strode faster, holding me carefully despite his ferocious expression and the determined clomp of his hooves.

I clung to him, grateful that I didn't have to walk, but distressed at the thought of the impending confrontation with Everston. The first man I'd allowed inside me, and he'd nearly killed me mere hours afterward.

And then there was the bad blood between the brothers. From what I'd gathered, they hadn't spoken to each other in years. Whatever resentment and rage had been brewing inside them all that time—it was about to explode.



Lyrical had taken the one thing.

The last thing I had left that was *mine*, the only thing I hadn't been forced to yield to the procession of women who had been my guests.

I had prostituted myself for all of them, seducing and then servicing them whenever they desired. My tongue, my tail, and my cock were there for them, free to use at any hour of the day.

I had yielded every bit of myself and my magic. I'd crafted whatever they wanted, over and over, until my hands trembled from the expense of magical energy.

And even then, I gave them still more.

The one thing I kept for *me* was my quarters on the fifth floor. I was saving that sacred space for The One, the woman who would love me, body and soul and tattered spirit.

Lyrical stole my one last thing.

I screamed my agonized rage at her, and she fled from me. In my fury I turned the steps into a slide, slick and perilous, but she didn't crash and break at the bottom. The animated denizens of the castle protected her, as I knew they would.

When she ran outside, I felt the horrific shudder of broken magic as the barriers splintered. The energy I'd used to create those barriers snapped back on me like whipcords, a soul-cleaving lash of power that sent me crashing onto my back, paralyzed and rigid, my eyes locked in a helpless stare.

For hours I lay there, unable to move, while my body and mind tried to cope with the forceful breach of that spell.

I had twined so much of my blood and being into those magical roses, and I'd linked the barriers around the castle to them.

I'd never imagined anyone would be able to break that enchantment. The recoil of it nearly killed me.

Lying there, I could do nothing to stop the welaway that plunged past me a short time later. So the girl had been right after all—there had been a demon in the castle, and she had come to me for help.

And I, savage imbecile that I was—I'd screamed at her. Because she had taken the one thing I had left—the space I was preserving for my beloved savior.

Lyrical had passed through the magical shield around my rooms and entered my sanctum.

The shield around my rooms was not nearly so strong or complicated as the one surrounding the castle. When she'd breached it, I hadn't felt a thing. I hadn't wakened until she called out to me.

She'd shattered both my crafted barriers easily, in a single night, without seeming to feel the strain of it at all.

Spell-splitter, charm-breaker. She was a magical rarity encased in beautiful soft flesh, and I'd frightened her away.

Why hadn't the welaway attacked me? Perhaps my catatonic state fooled it into thinking I was dead. Perhaps it only craved fresh meat.

Whatever the reason, I was intact and undevoured when I finally came out of my trance.

The sun had already risen when I began to move—just a finger-twitch at first, and then my arms and legs—slowly, creakily, achingly. I sat up, and pain shot through my spine. A pulsing agony pounded through my temples.

I'd soiled myself. But I hardly cared, because Lyrical was likely dead now, eaten by the welaway. My only hope was that she'd somehow found Caswell, that he'd been able to protect her.

Improbable. My brute of a brother was just as likely to eat her himself.

Perhaps that wasn't a fair assessment. From the upper balconies I'd watched him caring tenderly for his plants. He had a gentler side.

Heaving myself to my feet, I hobbled along the corridor to a bathing room and cleaned up, leaving the mess in the hallway for my servants to deal with. Every bone, joint, and muscle in my body ached. My inflamed nerves shot bolts of intermittent pain along my skin every few seconds.

The washroom I'd entered still had a mirror, whole and intact. I stared at my serpentine features, my lizardlike spines. Then, with my claws, I gouged deep gashes in the reflective surface, roaring with agony at the vibrating shriek of nails on glass.

What I really wanted was to crawl down to the dungeon levels and chastise myself for what I'd done—for scaring away my chance at freedom. I'd made a horrible mess of this one. Even if she was still alive, Lyrical would never want me now.

I'd felt true connection and affection in her presence. When I was inside her, I'd felt her sweetness, her earnest attention to me as well as to her own pleasure.

And I had ruined it all because of my wretched obsession with my privacy, with preserving part of the castle for The One.

But I was tired of giving, always giving, and never gaining.

I'd given everything I had to the other girls, and yet it was never enough. In the end I was always left empty, hungry, gouged open inside and bleeding copiously from a wound I could never staunch.

Clean but still naked, I made my way to the highest balcony of the castle, and I surveyed the gardens. I scanned the trees and lawns and hedgerows from the east wall to the west. I raked my gaze down the southern paths and squinted at the far corner of our domain, just outside the circumference of my magical influence. That corner was where my brother lived in his hut, like the animal he was.

At the beginning of the curse, I'd considered letting him stay in the castle with me. But a monstrous clomping thing like him had no delicacy. He'd have wrecked the floors and ruined the upholstery, and the repairs would have been a constant drain on my magic. Not to mention the fact that a big bull-beast thundering through the halls would have gotten in the way of my seduction techniques.

So I had made the difficult but necessary choice to banish him to the gardens. He was happier out there anyway, with the grass and the trees. It was better for him. Beasts of the field should live outdoors, after all. I looked down, closer to the foot of the tower atop which I stood—and then I leaned over the balcony so quickly I nearly fell.

Far below me, coming down a well-trodden path, was Caswell. He was approaching the back door to the kitchen.

And he had Lyrical in his arms.

At the sight of her delicate body clasped in his wolfish paws, my entire being revolted, torn by clashing emotions. Relief that she was alive mingled with a seething jealousy that he was touching her, holding her.

I raced back to my rooms and swept a robe around myself. Then I stormed downstairs, sending all the animated brooms and dusters and dishes scuttling for cover. They knew better than to be near me when I was in this mood.

Back when I was still getting used to my monstrous body, I'd accidentally broken two of the animated items—a teacup and a plate. Horrified, I had mended them with magic. But they had never moved again. Whatever soul they'd possessed, my carelessness had destroyed it.

I tried not to think about the fact that I'd killed them. Murdered them. Even in my worst moods, that knowledge gnawed at my brain. Since then I'd taken care to only wreak havoc on dull, soulless objects.

Still, the living objects that used to be my guards and servants didn't seem to trust my self-control. They fled from my darkest moods. Wise of them, I suppose. But it hurt, and it made me angrier.

I threw open the kitchen door just as Caswell set the girl down. Her skin was pale and smudged, and there was a bit of moss in her hair. She wore the black lace nightdress I'd selected for her, and her long legs were scratched and bruised.

She watched me with a gaze that was cautious, pitying, and defiant all at once.

My brother stood beside her. I had not seen him up close in decades, and the horror of his bestial form struck me anew. Shaggy, coarse, monstrous, clad only in a canvas loincloth. Despite his bovine features, I could clearly read the fury in his eyes.

"Everston," he growled.

"Caswell," I replied.

I had many things I wanted to say, but I couldn't force any of them past my lips. I could only make a low hissing sound at the sight of Lyrical shrinking against Caswell's burly arm, as if she thought he could protect her—from *me*.

"There was a demon in the grounds last night," Caswell said. "Do you know anything about that, *brother*?"

Of course I did. I knew how the beast must have gotten in. But the secret passage in the dungeons was only intended for things to go *out*. In all the decades I'd lived here, nothing had ever come back in. The fact that the demon had entered shortly after Lyrical's arrival seemed significant. Her passage into the grounds, her arrival at the castle—those events had disturbed the magical equilibrium of this place.

I wasn't foolish enough to hope that her arrival signaled any kind of hope for us, especially not now, not after I'd ruined things with her.

For my brother and me, there could be no new beginning—only the interminable, torturous postponement of the end.

"I have no idea how such a creature could have entered," I said. "Have you tested the borders? Are we free to leave the grounds?"

"Lyrical and I both tried leaving," Caswell said. "It remains impossible." He took a step nearer to me. "How could that thing get in?"

"I have no idea."

"See, I think you do." Caswell stomped closer, his shaggy head lowered, his menacing horns pointed at me.

Instinctively I stepped back into the kitchen—and then I wondered, with a flash of panic, if Caswell could enter the castle now. The magic I'd twined with the roses had prevented the women from leaving the castle, but Lyrical had broken that enchantment. The other spell that kept Caswell *out* should still be intact—but what if it wasn't?

Caswell must have been thinking the same thing, wondering if he could step into my sanctuary now. He stalked right up to the door, his hooves scraping across the stone doorstep. But when he tried to enter the kitchen, he seemed to hit an invisible wall.

He snarled at me through the transparent barrier of my spell, and I grinned at him, showing all my teeth.

"I haven't lost my power, dear brother," I said. "You're still unwelcome here."

"It's not fair that you keep him out of his own home," Lyrical said. Her lavender eyes burned with anger.

I softened my tone just for her. "I have reasons for it, my beauty."

"Don't talk to me like that, you degenerate snake," she snapped. "Caswell told me about the curse. You've been keeping all the chances at love for yourself. You're a self-absorbed, power-hungry, intemperate bastard."

I leaned toward her, itching to dart out and grip her throat in my hand and kiss her into submission. But if I placed one foot outside, Caswell would attack me.

"That's what you think of me?" I hissed at Lyrical.

"It is."

"That isn't what you thought last night, when I was feasting between your legs," I crooned. "Or when you came on my cock. Your body milked me so well, little rabbit."

She flushed a deep, lovely rose color, and I grinned.

Caswell snarled, showing his fangs. "Watch your tongue."

"Ah yes, my tongue. We haven't talked about how prettily you came after I put my tongue inside you, Lyrical, after I licked my way through your inner barriers and tasted your virgin's blood."

Lyrical's eyes locked with mine, and the sadness in them silenced me.

"Why are you doing this?" she said softly. "Turning those precious moments sour? I don't regret what I gave you. We were strangers, you and I, with a need between us, and I'm not ashamed of sating it. But I wish you had valued me enough to spare me your anger, and to spare all of us from this coarse recital of the time we shared."

Cowed and heartsick, I shifted my gaze, avoiding her eyes.

"And I think you know more about the welaway than you're telling," she added.

"What did you do with all the women who came before her?" Caswell interjected. "Did you kill them when they refused to love you?"

"It has something to do with the roses," Lyrical told him, still glaring at me. "Their fate was bound up with the enchanted roses they picked. The question is, since I broke the spell that was intended to keep me inside, am I still bound to the rose?"

I didn't want to tell her the terrible truth of the roses. I'd spent years perfecting my magic, studying the finer points of spellwork. She didn't have the rose with her, so I couldn't spy on her through it anymore. But I knew she was still connected to it. She would eventually meet the same fate as the other girls.

"He's not going to answer," Caswell snarled. "Selfish prick. The least you can do is give Lyrical some breakfast, Everston, after the way you've treated her."

"And how have I treated her?" My voice shrilled through my sharp teeth. "I gave her a place to rest, a hot bath, rooms of her own, a fine dinner, and a beautiful gown. I gave her conversation, access to the library, and the pleasure of my sensual talents. She had free reign of the entire castle except for *one single space* that I reserved for my own. And she betrayed my hospitality by invading that space."

"Because I was about to be eaten!" Lyrical shouted. Her small fists were clenched tight, and she looked entirely savage. I had no doubt she would rip me apart as readily as Caswell would if I stepped outside. She apparently hadn't realized that she could enter the castle anytime she liked, and leave it at will. My barrier magic didn't work on her.

Even as I thought the words, her expression changed, as if she was realizing her new freedom.

As she darted forward, I used magic to slam the door in her face and lock it. I slid the bar into place across the door as well. There was no way she could break through solid oak reinforced with steel, and because of my magical defenses, Caswell couldn't help her.

I was safe in here, alone.

I curled my hands into fists, relishing the slash of my claws through my own skin. My pain and anger spiraled together, sending a red-hot haze into my brain. This conversation had not gone well. Any apologetic impulse I'd had was gone now, doused by their belligerence and suspicion.

"I don't conjure breakfast for ungrateful girls and wretched beasts," I yelled through the door. "Go ahead and starve for all I care!"



I walked the first floor of the castle, locking and barring every door, securing the shutters over every window. It took the better part of an hour, but by the end, I'd ensured that Lyrical couldn't get back inside.

Once that was done, I could no longer postpone a far more unpleasant task—a foray into the dungeons to inspect the secret passage.

It had been constructed as a way for the royal family to escape if invaders ever broke through the castle's defenses. I'd tried to leave by that route myself, but I'd always been repelled by the Faerie's curse.

But other things could get out that way.

When there was only one petal left on a girl's rose, I would take her down to the dungeon and shut her into that cell, the one with access to the secret passage. I'd tried to let the women out that way while they were still in human form, but the grip of the enchanted rose was impenetrable, even to the one who had laid the spell. I could not release them from what I had wrought—at least not without lethal harm to myself.

And here was the secret I'd kept from my brother, all these long years.

When a girl entered the grounds, the Fae curse prevented her from leaving. Once the girl plucked one of my roses, a countdown began. The rose would guide her to me and entrap her within a second prison—the castle walls. The rose enabled me to spy on her and

influence her with aphrodisiac scents—but in exchange, it gave me a limited time to win her heart.

If she decided to love me, she would be released from the rose even as I was freed from my curse.

But if she did not love me before the last petal fell—then the terror of the magic revealed itself.

Magic always had a cruel side. Always the terrible and monstrous blended with the good and pleasant.

When the last petal drifted from each woman's rose, she would transform into a demon of darkness, a creature of night and horror.

A welaway.

I'd watched every transformation, out of guilt and out of respect to the women. I felt I owed it to them.

And yet part of me had always felt vindictively satisfied, as if they deserved their fate for refusing to love me.

After a guest had completed the transformation into a welaway, she would nose around the cell until she inevitably noticed the only way out—the secret passage. I never closed the entrance to that tunnel—after all, only a demon could escape that way, and nothing had ever tried to come back in, until last night.

I didn't blame myself for the side effect of the rose spell. I blamed the vagaries of magic itself. I hadn't intentionally woven that particular consequence into my spellwork—*magic* had decided it. Magic had a mind of its own.

The welaways had existed in the woods of our kingdom for more than a century. Two of my cousins had been killed by them when I was a young sorcerer just learning how to use my magic. That was the first time I could remember hearing of the monsters.

After that incident, I'd paid close attention to any mention of the creatures. The men and women of the court had speculated about the demons' origins, and most seemed to blame the Fae. The Fair Folk were easy scapegoats for anything dreadful or inexplicable, from plagues to droughts to hailstorms.

When the first woman I'd charmed with a rose transformed into a welaway, she had nearly killed me before I could overcome her and wrestle her downstairs into the cell.

After witnessing that first change, I assumed that the other welaways in the forest must be the offspring of other sorcerers' spells, or the foul result of various Fae curses and charms. But I didn't think much further on it. Those within the walls were my concern; anything outside was someone else's problem.

I stalked through the corridors of the first floor until I reached the armory, where my father's guards once gathered to clean their weapons and receive their daily orders. The entrance to the dungeons was there—a massive door reinforced with slabs of metal and enormous locks. Beyond it, stone steps descended in damp, cool blackness.

The door to the prison was open—but there was nothing odd about that. I'd left it ajar for years. The prisoners who had been in the cells when Andralia's curse took effect had all transformed into waste buckets or living manacles bolted to the walls. They needed no locks to keep them confined.

Down into the dank chill I went, flicking my fingers to light torches and lamps as I proceeded along the central corridor of the dungeon. I passed the rooms where my father's intelligence officers used to torture spies and criminals—rooms that I now used as my own private punishment chambers. Those walls had echoed my screams of self-hatred and pain far too many times throughout the decades.

I suppressed a shudder and continued down the long, long hallway, until at last I reached the cell at the far end, the one with the secret tunnel. I felt sure I'd left the cell door shut and locked after the last girl's transformation—but it gaped open.

The bars were bent and twisted. I ran my finger along the grooved teeth marks in the metal.

One of the welaways must have followed the escape route in reverse and come back into the castle.

There was no way to know with certainty if the demon was one of mine, or some other sorcerer's cursed offspring. I suspected she must have been one of my girls, though—how else would she have known of the tunnel's existence? She must have had some remnant of memory—possibly an impulse for revenge. But then why hadn't she killed me while I lay helpless and paralyzed in the hall?

My brain circled the problem again, but as before, I could only conclude that the whiplash of the broken barrier charm must have changed the welaway's perception of me somehow. She'd thought me dead, or hadn't noticed me at all, preferring to chase after the fresh meat that was Lyrical.

Beyond the destroyed bars of the cell, the mouth of the secret tunnel gaped wide, a black hole in the stone wall.

The lever to open and close the tunnel lay in a recessed nook, concealed by a statue of two men writhing in pain or ecstasy. With my mental powers I cranked the lever, and a section of the cell wall ground back into place, sealing itself neatly.

The result was seamless. No one who didn't know of the tunnel's existence would ever suspect it was there.

Caswell should have remembered the secret passage. After all, he was the older twin, the more serious one, eager to take the throne when our father finally abdicated. When he wasn't charming and defiling virgins with me, he'd been dedicated to learning everything about our home and kingdom.

But perhaps, after nearly one hundred years as a wild beast, he'd forgotten the structural details of his former home. At this point he probably knew his garden domain as intimately as I knew the castle.

Reassured that I would have no more unwelcome guests, I went back upstairs to face the next pressing problem—redeeming myself in Lyrical's eyes, and convincing her to give me another chance.



Lyrical and I didn't see Everston for a few days. She wandered the gardens with me, chirping questions and comments in her sweet songbird tones, with furs from my cottage wrapped over that flimsy black nightdress of hers.

We shared fruits and vegetables from the garden, but they were not overabundant. I had filled much of the grounds with decorative plants, not edible ones. With two of us consuming the produce, it was disappearing at an alarming rate. I'd become too dependent on Everston's daily gifts of conjured food.

Once I realized that Songbird had some skill with gardening, I let her help me with some of the beds.

"My family was comfortable once," she told me. "Not wealthy, mind you, but comfortable, back when my mother was alive. I suspect she curtailed my father's gambling and said 'no' to my sisters when they became too greedy for things they couldn't afford. But for years I've had to manage things. I taught myself how to care for a garden, so we could have fresh things to eat. Some of the goodwives in the villages gave me tips and ideas. Ways to keep the insects at bay, to prevent rot and disease. You've done surprisingly well here, given your limited resources."

"Mm," I said, by way of accepting the compliment. "It helps that there is no actual winter here. As I told you, we have some cold nights—and the parts of the garden nearest the outer wall may frost when it's winter in the forest—but in the larger part of the gardens, the growing season is perpetual."

There was more I could have said, about the vast amount of careful pruning required to avoid letting the whole place be

overgrown—but I was reticent. My vocal cords felt scratchy and rough from disuse, and I didn't like the grating rasp of my voice, or the sloppy way the vowels sometimes slid out of my bull's lips.

I hated the way I would occasionally snort or snuffle without thinking about it. I'd gotten into the habit over the decades, because there was no one for whom I had to make any effort. With Lyrical around, I was trying to be more human and less beast.

It was harder than I expected, and that bothered me deeply.

Despite my reluctance to talk, she kept teasing sentences out of me, persuading me to explain the placement of particular beds and plants, the thought process behind the garden's layout.

"I like numbers," I told her. "I like the specifics of each plant, and I make lists in my head—the kind of soil they need, how much water, how much space. But it's an instinct too. I look at a flowerbed, and I can see what it needs—a plant of a certain height and texture, for balance and beauty. Then I sort through my mental catalog of available plants, and I find one with the right specifications. And then I take a cutting, transfer a plant, or use seeds that I have."

Lyrical smiled at me and patted my arm. "I like the way you think, Caswell."

We passed the time in this way, without really speaking of Everston at all. But four days after our confrontation with him, we walked by the kitchen yard and saw a bundle lying on the back doorstep of the castle.

Lyrical glanced at me. "He left something for us."

I chuffed and snorted. "Could be a trap."

"A trap? Why? He might be angry, but I don't think he actively wishes us harm."

"Think about it," I urged. "If he believes I have a chance with you, a chance of breaking the curse—that would mean he'd be left as a beast forever, while I reclaimed human form. He can't kill me, but he might be desperate enough to hurt you."

Lyrical eyed me, and her mouth tweaked up at the corner. "You said there was no chance for you and me."

"Of course there isn't," I growled. "But Everston might be foolish enough to think there is. Wait here, and I'll go see what he left us."

I tromped across the kitchen yard with a nod to the animated pump, and I scraped the bundle's cloth wrapping aside.

Everston had left us a pie, a book of Fae stories, and an ivory dress trimmed in lavender lace.

Or rather, he'd left those things for her.

He was trying to win her back. I knew him well enough to know that the gift wasn't an apology—Everston never apologized. Sometimes, after he'd done something particularly selfish, he would offer gifts to soften and smooth the memory of his deed. But that was only because he wanted to reinstate the connection between himself and the person he'd offended. He liked such connections, only because of what people could do for him.

I gestured for Lyrical to approach. She gasped with pleasure at the sight of the gown. "Finally, something besides this damn nightdress," she said. "Turn around, Caswell. I'm putting it on right now."

"Right now?" I turned my back, grumbling. "What if he's watching?"

"The shutters and doors are all closed. I don't think he can see me."

I heard the rustle of the fabric and Lyrical's soft coo of delight. "All right, lace me up, would you, Caswell?"

"Lace you up?" I said blankly. "Did you forget about these?" I turned around, holding up my wolfish paws.

And then my mind went blank, because the sight of her in that creamy, lacy gown sent a wild thrill through my heart and body. Her bruises had nearly healed, and now that she was less exhausted she moved more freely, with the liquid grace of a fine lady—though she had the mouth of a tavern wench whenever she was surprised or anxious.

The lacy neckline of the dress skimmed dangerously low across her breasts. Her collarbones were sharp from deprivation, and I felt a sudden pang that I hadn't been able to feed her more satisfying food. She needed protein—meat and cheese and milk and eggs. She'd

been starving when she came to us, and she didn't look much better off now

Still, she was beautiful, almost ethereal, with her golden hair glinting in the late afternoon glow of the sun. My gaze traced the pale column of her neck, the delicate lines of her chin and jaw, and the drape of her lashes over those unusual lavender eyes.

"I've seen you repot delicate seedlings," she said, smiling at me. "You can handle a few laces."

I clomped around behind her, swallowing as I was confronted by the length of her exposed back. Gingerly I plucked at the laces, drawing them carefully tight. I worked from the small of her back all the way up to her shoulder blades.

My claws trembled with the effort of being so very gentle—and perhaps with the effort of not letting a single strand of my abominable fur touch her flawless skin. She truly was a beauty, worthy of gracing royal halls. And to think she'd been struggling and starving with her wretched family, the ones who had the gall to sell her. What if those slavers hadn't been attacked by the demon wolves? They would have pawned her off to some randy male who'd befoul her for his own pleasure.

My paws shook with rage and horror at what could have been. But was her fate really much better with us? After all, my brother had fucked her that first night. He'd taken advantage of her weariness and her confusion.

"I'm sorry for what he did to you," I said, low. "For his anger and violence, and for—his lust."

"I was lustful too," she said. "His rose may have heightened what I already felt, but he gave me choices. I could have denied him. But I wanted it, Caswell. I needed it. So whatever sins he has committed, do not count that among them."

The thought of my brother's serpentine form crawling over her, licking her, plunging inside her—it sickened me. I jerked the laces of the dress tight and tied them off clumsily. Then I strode to the kitchen door and pounded on it with all my might, roaring my impotent fury and fear.

"Everston, you coward!" I bellowed. "What happens to the women? Come out here and tell us! She deserves to know!"

"Caswell!" Lyrical jumped forward and gripped my arm. "It's all right. I don't have to know yet."

My chest was heaving, my pulse raging. "I can't let it happen to you. Whatever happened to them—it will not be your fate."

"And I thank you for that," she said. "But you forget—Everston is a beast, too. He is just as hurt and frightened as you are. He has made an overture to us, an attempt to communicate. That's a good sign. We have to be grateful, and careful, or he may retreat again."

"Giving you clothes and food is no more than Everston *should* do," I growled. "He has performed his duty as a host, nothing more. Why should he be lauded for that?"

"Caswell." Lyrical's grip on my arm tightened. "Please go back into the garden. Leave him to me."

She stared at me so earnestly that I began to relent, grudgingly. I knew I was being cajoled and handled, the same way she planned to cajole and handle my brother. A skilled little diplomatist, this Songbird.

"Go," she said, pushing me gently away from the kitchen door and back toward the garden paths. "I'll join you shortly."

With a snarl through my bared teeth, I loped away, down a path between tall hedges. The late afternoon sun did not reach there, and shadows clustered around me. I felt oddly soothed by the familiar dark.

I never heard what Lyrical called through the door, nor did I know whether my brother was on the other side, listening. But for the next few weeks, he left things on the doorstep every day—books, gowns, underthings, blankets, a hairbrush, and jewelry. He left food too, increasingly elaborate and delicious food. There was usually one serving of each dish he provided, but Lyrical insisted on sharing it all with me

"You have to try the soufflé, Caswell," she said one day, as we sat in the kitchen yard on a cloth with the conjured food on a plate between us. "Here." And she lifted a forkful to my muzzle.

I opened my mouth, self-conscious about my sharp teeth, my saggy lips, and my enormous bovine tongue.

Lyrical didn't seem to care. She placed the bite between my jaws, drawing the fork out slowly. Her eyebrows lifted, expectant, as I

mouthed the bite.

"Delicious," I growled, and her eyes warmed with delight.

"Your voice," she said softly. "It's so dark and growly. I love it."

"Then you'd be the first."

She surveyed me, her eyes lingering over the human aspects of me—my chest, stomach, and upper arms. "You were handsome, weren't you?"

"Everston liked to say that I shared his face." I snorted. "Even back then, he thought the world revolved around him. And yes, we were both considered very handsome. We could have any woman we wanted—or so we thought."

I didn't miss the spark of fervent interest in Lyrical's eyes. She knew I was edging closer to the story of our curse. Each time before this I had skirted the subject, so she did not ask. She only shifted, tucking her feet under her and puckering her lips—a habit of hers when she wanted to speak but was restraining herself. Strange how I was learning her body language, and only a few weeks after she'd fled from Everston.

"Are there any paintings of you two in the castle?" she asked.

"I suppose there were. Everston may have destroyed them. Maybe you can ask him for one, through the door." I jerked my head toward the kitchen.

"I'm not even sure if he listens when I talk to him," she said, flushing.

That pink blush on her cheeks was a glittering dagger to my heart. Was it possible she had forgiven him for his outburst on that fateful night a few weeks ago? How could she forgive so easily? Did she like him?

"What do you say to him, when you talk through the door?" I asked.

"It's a lot of nonsense, really. Just—apologizing for breaking into his private space. Telling him that I understand how lonely he's been, how desperate he must feel. And that I—that I believe he's better than this. He can do better—be better."

My stomach went cold and heavy. Those were just the sort of things Everston would want to hear—that *I* would want to hear. But

of course she would say them to him, and not me. Even when we were human, the girls always aimed for Everston first, and then settled for me if they couldn't get him. I was the quiet brother, the one who liked numbers and facts, the one who could happily spend hours alone, working on a project.

"Those are fine things to tell him," I said gruffly. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you cared for him."

"I care about both of you," said Lyrical. "I just thought—if I could love Everston and free him, then he could find a way to free *you*, since he's a sorcerer. We could leave these walls, maybe find books and spells to help you. Or maybe we could hunt down the Faerie who made the curse and convince them to put you back in human form as well."

"Don't do me any favors," I snarled, rising awkwardly from the ground.

"Caswell!" She jumped up too, and reached out to catch my hand—but her soft little fingers snagged on the tips of my claws as I was turning away.

She cried out in pain, and I whirled back, staring aghast at the ruby drops of blood falling from her scratched hand.

"I'm sorry," I gasped. "Gods, Songbird, I'm so sorry."

"No, no!" she exclaimed, while tears welled in her eyes. "It was my fault. For a second I forgot about the claws."

I slashed off a strip of the cloth we'd been using as a picnic blanket, and I bound up her thin fingers. taking the utmost care not to hurt her again.

"Never forget that I'm a monster," I said quietly.

"Your body may be, but you're not, inside," she said. "You're gentle, and sweet. I've never seen such a fascinating blend of the logical and the artistic in one man."

Her hand trembled in the center of my paw. How I wanted to caress those slim tapered fingers, to circle that fragile wrist with my own hand. My heart, my soul, my whole being seemed to swell large in my chest, yearning to flood out and envelop her.

I suspected my Songbird felt something too, because her chest lifted and fell at a quicker pace than usual, and when she raised her eyes to mine, there was a heated awareness in them, a look both sultry and innocent. Her lips were flushed red, slightly parted. Decadently kissable.

I ached for her, burned for her. And my wretched beast's body reacted, a surge of violent arousal.

Releasing her hand, I turned away and bolted into the maze, galloping at full speed down the hedged passages, taking turn after turn until I was sure I was far away from her.

I paused on a short path lined with leafy bushes, and I extricated my cock from the loincloth I wore. It hung down slightly, fat and heavy, lined with veins and glistening with arousal at the tip. An enormous cock, far too big for a woman to handle, I suspected.

I wrapped its girth with my paw and began rubbing along it, ramping up the pleasure. With my other paw I grasped my breast, massaging the packed muscle and the nipple Lyrical had touched once.

Panting, I ratcheted up my arousal until I burst with pleasure, jetting thick streams of cum over the nearby foliage. But it was an empty release.

I felt sickened, hollow. Disgusted with myself. The climax did nothing to sate the gnawing ache in my heart, the raw gaping *want* that only Songbird could salve.

Weak from my release, I sank to the ground and heaved a series of bone-jarring sobs. My shoulders curved inward, my shaggy head bowed, and I wept for my old self, my original human body. I cried out, enraged at the wracking pain that was *caring*. Why had I wanted a chance with this girl? Falling for her, hoping for something that could never happen—it was agony.

Everston had endured this over and over, with every female guest he'd lured into the castle. He'd charmed them, bedded them—and none of them had loved him. One by one, each woman had rejected him.

Maybe he had kept the women to himself for selfish reasons. Or maybe, as Lyrical suggested, he'd thought that he could free himself and *then* find a way to break my curse. Maybe his motives hadn't been entirely self-centered.

Whatever his goals or motivations, Everston had felt this excruciating agony many times throughout the decades.

And for the first time in our cursed century, I pitied my brother.



I had come to cherish my daily one-sided conversations with Lyrical.

The first time she'd lingered and spoken to me, I'd spent the entire time silently weeping on the other side of the kitchen door, flayed by my own guilt—because she'd apologized. *Apologized* to me, the monster. She said she was sorry for bursting into my private space.

"I know you were startled out of a sound sleep, shocked by me banging through the door into your rooms," she'd said. "You probably had spells set up around your chambers too, and I imagine it was a nasty surprise when I broke through them. And my warning about the welaway must have seemed ridiculous, because you were convinced nothing could get in. I can see why you reacted like you did. It still wasn't right of course—you shouldn't have been so violent—but I understand. You're not a beast, Everston. You're a man who feels lost and trapped at the same time. You're in a kind of triple prison—your body, the castle, and the grounds. How lonely you must have felt when there weren't any guests to court! And I can only guess how every rejection must have hurt you."

When she kept monologuing to me, day after day, I began to feel —not less guilty, exactly—but perhaps forgiven.

I never replied to her. My own pride and pain held me back. Besides, I was afraid that if I responded, she would remember her rightful anger at me, and she'd stop offering me those small interludes of peace and friendship.

So I let her talk, and I simply listened.

"Caswell and I harvested potatoes this morning," she said one day. "I love potatoes. I love plunging my fingers into the soil and searching them out. I love the dusty, earthy feel of them. I like cooking them in all sorts of ways—frying them, boiling them, baking them. Of course Caswell won't let me do anything but bake them in the coals. I think he's scared of fire, you know, with all the fur. He's not one for cooking very much—or at all. He prefers to chew things up raw. Have you seen his teeth? They're enormous, and sharp. Scary, I suppose, but I like them. They give him a savage look, but he's surprisingly gentle."

Another day she told me how she and Caswell had pulled back the ivy in a courtyard full of statues. "They look much better now that they're not so overgrown," she said. "Although I kind of liked the overgrown look, too. It was mysterious in a beautiful way. Like the two of you. Although I suppose Caswell isn't beautiful, strictly speaking. He's got too much bull and wolf in him for that. No, I'd say he's more majestic than beautiful. There's something sweet about him—a kindness under all that gruffness. Sometimes I can even make him laugh. I have to work hard for it, though. Did you know I made him laugh that first day? I tried to talk to him across the threshold, but the broom and some other kitchen objects shut the door between us. I swore—sometimes I swear badly—and then I heard him laughing through the door. It sounded awful—scared me a bit. But now I really like the sound of it. He makes another sound I like, too—this kind of *mmm* growl in his chest."

I wasn't sure Lyrical realized how much she talked about my brother. Through her, I was beginning to know him again—to remember the man with whom I'd shared everything for the first twenty-odd years of my life. He and I had been close—though my magic had caused some distance and strife between us. He'd been jealous of my abilities. Even though he'd tried not to, he had showed that envy in a million tiny ways. And I'd resented him for the jealousy, because it wasn't as if I'd *chosen* to be gifted with magic. Magic was enjoyable to use, but it also meant more pressure, more lessons, more attention from everyone in the kingdom and beyond.

At the beginning, when my powers were still growing, I would sometimes spend hours in bed recovering from simple spells—until one of my earliest instructors taught me a trick, a shortcut to gather the energy I needed.

"You can siphon energy from people and animals," he explained. "Even if they're not gifted with magic, you can take their energy into yourself, and your body will convert it to usable fodder for your spellwork. If you just take a little, they'll never notice."

"That seems wrong," I'd protested, frowning.

"It's not wrong," my instructor had said soothingly. "Siphoning energy preserves a sorcerer's health so he can do good things for others. And if you only take a little, no one ever has to know. But don't siphon from people near you, in the castle, or you'll end up noticeably weakening them. Siphon when you're out riding, or when you're in one of the villages. Take bits of energy from the people and animals you see and store it up so you can use it later."

I had taken his advice, and I siphoned frequently in those days, using bits of energy from others to fuel elaborate and fantastical spells. But now, trapped in the castle, I had no one from which to siphon. I had to dole out my magical energy carefully each day.

Sometimes I had an odd sensation, as if my inner reservoir of power had threads running from it that extended far beyond the walls of the castle and its gardens. As if I were tethered to living things beyond the bounds of the spells Andralia had laid. If I tugged on those threads, energy flowed along them, pooling in my body. But I wasn't sure of the source, so I didn't draw from those threads very often. Mostly I used my own personal vault of magical energy, which replenished itself nightly if I was careful not to deplete it too far.

I spent most of my daily energy crafting things for Lyrical—and for Caswell, since she seemed intent on sharing everything with him.

Every day, after they had eaten and Caswell had gone off into the gardens again, Lyrical came to the door of the kitchen and told me more about her experiences in the garden with my brother.

"He's really intelligent, like you," she said. "You know, you both have a lot in common. I'll bet you were excellent friends once, before all of this happened. It was really cruel of the Fae who cursed you to separate you two this way. You're twins, for gods' sake. You should be partners in this, working together to find a way out of it. Instead, you've been told that if one of you finds love, the other is doomed forever." Her voice cracked. "I can't believe how rotten that is. If I ever meet that Fae, I'm giving them a piece of my mind."

I smiled, resting my forehead against the door. The thought of our little golden-haired Lyrical, fists on hips, facing off against the stunning figure of Andralia—it was as hilarious to me as it was painful.

Andralia—the Faerie who'd disguised herself with a human glamour so she could join in our royal revels. Caswell and I had no idea of her power and ancestry, not until it was too late.

The faces of my servants, friends, guards, and even my parents had dimmed and blurred in my mind over the past hundred years. I had portraits of some family members to refresh my memory, but those flat, stilted images weren't enough. Yet one face remained fixed in my brain—the face of the Fae woman I'd pursued so insistently, who had resisted my advances with slaps and barbed words, followed by sultry smiles that gave me just enough encouragement to keep trying.

Andralia. She was a soft sweet rose surrounded by feral thorns and serrated leaves. And when at last she had parted those leaves and dulled those thorns for me, I'd betrayed her.

I could remember two expressions of hers with perfect clarity.

I remembered the toss of her head against the pillow, the swell of her parted lips, and the delicate bend of her brows as she went taut in my arms, cresting that peak of pleasure.

And I remembered the terrifying majesty of her rage, the scornful twist of her mouth, and the searing, agonized heat of her eyes as she pronounced the curse upon us. She'd looked at Caswell first, and then she had focused all her pain and anger on me. "I loved you," she'd said, and my heart had cracked, a wide fissure that I hadn't been able to fill, not for decades.

Andralia's words had echoed in my nightmares over and over, and they rang in my brain while Lyrical explained exactly what she'd say if she ever met the Fae who cursed us.

After a torrent of righteous indignation, Lyrical finally said, "I'm not even sure if you're there during our little talks, Everston. But thank you for the supplies. And if you have a chance to make me some shoes, I'd be grateful."

I sat frozen on the kitchen floor, paralyzed with guilt. Why hadn't I thought to make the poor girl some shoes? She'd been running

around barefoot in the gardens for weeks, and her little feet hadn't been in great shape when she came to us.

Cursing myself, I conjured the footwear immediately—sturdy boots with low heels. I added decorative swirls to the leather for a feminine touch.

When I opened the door, Lyrical was gone, and so were the signs of the picnic she'd enjoyed with Caswell.

With a sorcerer's power came a certain affinity to the courses of nature, and I could tell by the scent of the air and the aura of the sky that it would rain that night. So instead of placing the boots on the doorstep, where they might get soaked, I placed them on the kitchen table. I was about to lock and bar the door again—but I hesitated.

Lyrical and Caswell were not my enemies. I was weary of shutting them out—I ached for them—for *both* of them. The loneliness in my soul gaped so vast and dark that I thought I might drown in it if I did not find some lifeline to pull me out. Lyrical was being that lifeline for me, without even realizing it. And her talk of Caswell had made me miss him so hard it was like a physical hunger.

So I closed the door, but I did not lock or bar it.

Lyrical was right. Caswell and I should have been working together on this all along. My twin wasn't my enemy. He'd always been my friend, my brother, with a touch of rivalry—but Andralia had heightened that rivalry and made it so much worse. She had severed the ties binding me to my brother, had delved a great rift between us.

In a moment of sheer dramatic impulse, I lifted my hands, and I pulled down the impenetrable spellwork I'd wrapped around the castle to keep Caswell out. I drew that energy back into myself, slowly, gasping at the painful influx of power.

Caswell might not know it, but he could enter and exit the castle anytime now. If it pleased him to come in and torture me, imprison me, shout at me—he could do so. I wouldn't resist any longer.

My love for my brother had shrunk to the tiniest ember, but Lyrical had stoked it back to life.

I loved Caswell.

And with the resurgence of that flame, another flame rekindled—or perhaps it had always existed. Perhaps it had only been veiled by my anger and desperation and guilt.

My brother wasn't my enemy. I loved him.

And Andralia wasn't my enemy either.

I was my own nemesis, the cause of my own pain.

True, Andralia was savage and vindictive—but hers was a reaction I recognized, one that mirrored my own personality. I understood Andralia, because our two souls were reflected in each other, an intrinsic bond we'd both sensed all those years ago.

Andralia, the Fae Princess I'd courted, and bedded, and betrayed.

Andralia, the woman I'd never stopped thinking of, over and over, with a pain that wasn't entirely angry or vengeful. The woman I'd prayed to, over and over, throughout the past century.

Andralia, whose face and form entered my mind all too often when I was pleasuring one of my female guests.

Andralia.

I'd loved her then.

Perhaps I loved her still.



After clearing up the picnic and speaking to Everston through the kitchen door, I returned to the cottage I shared with Caswell. I knew most of the paths by now, at least in this part of the garden—the hedge maze still baffled me.

Slowly I walked the path, my feet bare against the cool smooth paving stones. Tiny ridges of moss, interlaced between the stones, brushed my toes. The air smelled cool and sweet, tinged with the spice of herbs.

I inhaled deeply and gazed up at the gray clouds thickening overhead. Their bulk blotted out all but a few streaks of yellow sunset sky. Stray shafts of light shot across the garden—arrows of the dying day, piercing the rough bark, green leaves, and mossy stone walls.

It would probably rain in the night. A good thing, because we hadn't had much rain since I arrived. I still wasn't sure how the curse affected the weather within the castle grounds. Caswell didn't seem to understand it either. Maybe he'd tried to, and failed, so he simply accepted that it was.

He was the type of person who accepted the inevitable and moved stoically onward. Except what looked like acceptance for him was actually a deep and repressed rage that bubbled out occasionally. Since that first day, though, he'd never directed the anger at me. He aimed it at the invisible presence of Everston, the serpentine monster lurking somewhere behind the castle walls.

I pitied them both. I understood them both. And my body had reacted to both of them. When Caswell had laced up my dress and spoken to me in that growly tone, I'd felt the quiver of arousal along

my sex, the need building low in my belly. If I was honest, I'd felt that way more and more often around him in recent days.

What did that say about me, that I could be aroused in the presence of monsters?

I liked the human parts of Caswell. I would never tire of gazing at the magnificent ridges of his abs, or the tight swells of his pectorals and biceps. As a human, he must have been a fine specimen indeed.

But I appreciated his monstrous aspect, too. Something about the coarse, furred, muscle-bound bulk of him tugged at my most primal instincts.

I wanted him. Where the passionate link between Everston and me had been a single burning strand, brief and bright, my connection with Caswell was a series of thick cords woven between us, through familiarity and shared work. And each day gave me a new reason to care about him, to admire him.

But how was I to know real love—I, a peasant girl cast off by her family? My mother had died when I was very young, and since then no one had cared about me very much—not even my father. He loved me as much as he could manage, I suppose. Not enough to keep him from selling me as a slave.

Most of the middle-aged or older couples from the village seemed to annoy each other, or to function in a kind of forced partnership. The unattached young men always seemed to be salivating and leering at the unattached young women, who giggled and fluttered coyly in response.

None of that was what I felt, or wanted.

"I have to love one of them," I said aloud. "But which one? And how will I know what I feel is really love?"

There was no answer, except a heightened scuffling and scraping sound from behind me. I half-smiled, already aware of the various animated garden implements hopping along the path in my wake. They tended to follow me and Caswell around, helping with chores or simply bobbing in place, watching us. Though how they could perceive us with no visible eyes or ears was beyond me. Another magical thing that had to be accepted, not explained. Which went against every curious investigative instinct I possessed.

I sighed, turning to glance at the objects behind me. There was a rake, a spade, a hoe, a bucket, and what looked like a tomato cage. They hesitated, shifting shyly as I stared at them.

"I wish I could talk to the Faerie who cursed Caswell and Everston," I said. "Whatever the brothers did, it couldn't have been terrible enough to warrant this level of punishment. I've heard that the Fae are a harsh, vindictive sort, with little empathy or pity."

The garden implements scuffed the dirt slightly.

"I know you can't answer. More's the pity. But thank you for the company."

I continued on, toward the cottage. Caswell had constructed a rough sort of door to replace the one the welaway had smashed. Every night he slept across the doorway and insisted that I take the pile of pelts and blankets.

After lighting a lamp, I sat down on the blanket pile to read.

After a few hours, anxiety began to churn in my stomach. Caswell hadn't returned since he bandaged my accidental injury and then ran off into the garden.

What if he didn't come back?

What if another welaway got into the grounds and came after me? What if a demon came after Caswell and ripped him to shreds? He could heal from most wounds, but if a welaway actually ate him, or tore him into enough pieces, he might actually die.

I tossed the book aside and jumped up, snatching one of the furs to shield myself against the nighttime chill.

I had to go look for my beast.



When I poked my head out of the cottage again, night had truly fallen. All the paths and flowerbeds were silent and black. Piles of incoming stormclouds had blocked out all starlight.

The garden implements had settled into a pile near the door, but they perked up again at my appearance.

"Should I go check on him?" I asked them.

They all shivered, and the rake scratched "No" in the dirt, and then "He can care for himself"

"You can communicate?" I asked, stunned. "Oh my gods—I have so many questions. Do you know why they were cursed? Do you know anything about the Faerie who did it? Any idea how the welaway got into the castle?"

But the rake only scraped away their original message and returned to the others, going motionless and unresponsive.

"Fuck you," I whispered indignantly. "I'm going after him."

I almost picked up the rake, thinking I could use it as a weapon if any demons charged me while I was searching for Caswell—but I felt vaguely uneasy about handling something that had once been a living human. Everston had explained to me that all the animated things were once guards, servants, and castle inhabitants of one kind or another. I hadn't asked him or Caswell if any of their relatives had been transformed into living objects. From what they'd said, it sounded as if they were each other's only siblings. So where were their parents?

I ducked back into the cottage to light a lantern and put out the lamp. Though Caswell had hacked up and buried the welaway's carcass, the hoe I'd used to stab it still stood against the wall, splattered with dried blood. That hoe wasn't the animated kind, so I seized it and headed out of the cottage again.

I held the hoe clumsily under my arm, gripping the lantern with that same hand—and somehow I managed to yank the makeshift door shut behind me without the fur falling entirely off my shoulders. With my hoe and lantern, I ventured along one of the dark garden paths, casting the yellow circle of light over any large bushes that might be hiding Caswell in their shadow.

The night grew darker still, and a cold breeze whisked across the flowerbeds, tossing the plants and making the trees' foliage shiver. My hair whipped against my cheek. I recognized the sharp bite of the air—rain was coming, a cold rain that might turn to snow. Except Caswell said winter didn't affect the castle grounds, that snow never fell here.

How much of the spellwork of this place had been changed by my arrival? And why was it changed? How was I different from other humans?

Those thoughts were far too deep and dangerous to be pondered in the middle of a gloomy garden on a stormy night like this. My skin was already stippled with goosebumps—partly from the cold wind, and partly from the sight of the tall trees and towering hedges rising like shrouded monsters all around me.

The wind rattled dead vines against the rockery, stirred dry leaves into a chattering frenzy, and hissed cold through every layer I was wearing, scouring my flesh with icy fingers. Still I pressed on, ducking through arches in the hedge, skirting columnar junipers and shaggy cedars. My breath went ragged at the sight of every ghostly statue.

"Caswell," I called, but the wind caught my voice and dissolved it into wisps.

The first drops of rain burst like cold fire against my skin. More pellets rained down, a stinging shower of sleet that soaked my hair and my clothes in seconds.

My knees quaked from the cold, and my bare feet felt like slabs of ice, because for all his offerings of pretty gowns and underclothes, Everston had yet to leave me a gift of shoes.

I needed to turn back. But when I tried to reverse my steps, I found that navigating the garden in the daylight was quite different from navigating in the pitch dark, in the freezing rain.

My toes snagged on a paving stone, and I fell headlong. The hoe flew from my hand, clanging against the cobbles. My lantern rolled away and went out with a hiss.

I lay face-down on the slick stones, shuddering, sobs crawling up my throat, my wet hair pooling around me and the soggy fur weighing across my shoulders.

My craving for home peaked in that moment—except that I had no idea where home was. It certainly wasn't my thin pallet in my father's house, where I won the bread for the family but received only scraps in return. It wasn't the terrifying castle, where a snakelike magician slithered through gloomy halls and wolf-demons popped out of the woodwork. And it wasn't the smelly shack and the pile of pelts where I'd been sleeping for the past few weeks.

Home was something I hadn't found yet. And I wanted it desperately—craved it with every morsel of my being.

Perhaps I'd never find it.

Perhaps I would die here, in the bowels of a cursed garden, during a midnight storm.

Something shuddered through the ground—hoofbeats—a clumsy two-footed sort of gallop with which I'd grown very familiar.

Caswell.

I was about to leap up and greet him, but my body was too stiff with cold and wouldn't respond quickly enough. I had half-risen on my hands and knees when the thundering grew startlingly loud and a burly body crashed into me, throwing me face-down again.

For one panting, trembling moment, Caswell's ponderous body lay over mine. I could feel every inch of him pressed against my back and rear. That glorious hard chest and stomach, those massive arms—I loved the sensation of being enveloped by him, and I wanted to revel in it forever.

But he was heavy, so heavy. "Get off!" I gasped.

"Songbird." He pushed himself up and away from me. "What in the gods' names are you doing out here?"

"I came out," I said, my teeth rattling, "to look—for you—you big—bastard."

"You're soaking wet," he rumbled. "And half-frozen."

Even in my shivering, miserable state, the deep roll of his voice affected me, rippling through my lower belly and centering between my legs. His voice had that effect on me often. The influence became more powerful every day I was with him, so much so that I spent half my time in his presence in a state of flushed titillation. I knew how to satisfy myself privately, but I'd had no chance to indulge the craving. He was always around, somewhere nearby. I was never alone.

Except I'd been alone in the cottage, and stupid me—instead of taking advantage of the private time, I'd spent it worrying about Caswell and then wandering around after him. As the animated rake had implied, I should have known he'd be perfectly capable of

taking care of himself in the garden where he'd lived for *a hundred years*. Gods, I'd been stupid.

Caswell said nothing else, only scooped me off the ground, somehow managing to avoid nicking me with his claws. His rainslicked chest was steamy with warmth, and I couldn't help myself—I snuggled against him, eager to press every inch of my cold flesh to that tantalizing heat.

The ride in his arms was a bumpy one. Rain kept streaming down his horns and his bullish face and pouring over me—but eventually we made it back to the cottage. By then I was nearly insensible and immobile with cold.

Caswell set me down against the wall and shook his whole body, casting off showers of drops until his fur fluffed out wildly. He struggled with the lamp until he finally got it lit. Then he stared at me, aghast. "Your mouth is blue."

"I—I—" But I was too shivery to speak.

"I should have taken you to the castle and demanded that Everston let you in." Caswell released a long string of curses. "Take off your clothes, all of them. We have to get you warm, quickly."

I slumped against the wall, unable to obey. With a snarl he advanced on me, and with a gentleness that belied his gruff attitude, his claws sliced off the dress and underwear Everston had given me. I huddled amid the sodden rags, bared to him entirely for the first time. My nipples were pebbled painfully tight from the cold, and I couldn't stop shaking.

Caswell's entire frame was tense with concern, bordering on panic. He dragged me into the nest of pelts and blankets, like a wolf pulling prey back to its cave—except this beast wasn't going to devour me. He was trying to save me.

Caswell pulled a generous portion of the furs and blankets over my body, and then he slid beneath them with me. His hot skin felt like a furnace against mine, and I sank into the warmth with a whimper. One burly arm settled over me, and Caswell heaved a long, quivering sigh.

The cottage smelled of beast, and some of the blankets were coarse and scratchy, but I barely noticed. I pushed my toes into the damp hair of Caswell's legs and pressed my chest to his. Skin to skin

we lay, while feeling slowly returned to my limbs and my breath grew easier.

Even when I was warm again, I didn't move. I never wanted to leave the cozy pod of glowing warmth that Caswell and I had created. Drowsiness pervaded into my mind, blurring my thoughts.

"This feels so safe," I whispered.

Caswell's chest rumbled, almost a purr, but he said, "It is not safe. You are never entirely safe with me, not in this form. I told you, I have monstrous instincts that long to be sated. There is a part of me that wants to devour you whole."

A new sort of shiver raced over my skin at the words, but instead of pulling away, I only snuggled closer to him.

"This beast of mine is carnivorous, and aches to slice apart your sweet soft flesh, and swallow the chunks warm down my gullet, until your body lives in my belly. I say this not to frighten you, but to warn you. I keep that part of the monster in check, but it could escape. It has done so once before."

I swallowed against the rising lump of terror in my throat.

"I nearly caught the girl that time, but she made it into the castle. To Everston."

A long sigh of relief escaped me.

"If that ever happens," Caswell said, "you must run to Everston and make him let you in. He will protect you. Do you promise not to try to fight me or hide from me, but to run?"

"I won't have to," I told him.

"Promise me." His voice cracked with anguish, and his grip on my body tightened. "Promise you'll run to him."

"You'd send me to him?" I reared back a little so I could look into his dark eyes. "You'd deliver me to your rival, the brother you hate?"

"To save your life, I would do anything."

I squirmed my fingers out from between us and reached up, stroking his shaggy head. "You mean that, don't you?"

A low rumble was answer enough. The vibration of it, through his chest into mine, woke that delicate thrilling lust in my belly again.

"Caswell," I whispered.

Another rumbling growl. "Sleep."

Reluctantly I closed my eyes. "I don't think I can. I'm too—excited."

"Excited?"

"Yes. Because, well—you. This. I find myself—craving you—inside me." I could feel my face growing hotter at the bold words.

Caswell groaned. "Gods, why would you say that?" He shifted away from me, but not before I felt something brush against my stomach—something enormous, hot, and hard. His loins were swathed in fabric, but there was no hiding that telltale length when he was this close.

He moved farther away, covering himself with another blanket. I bit my lip, aroused and tortured at the same time, aware that he was suffering similarly.

He was muttering something—it sounded like a list of plant species.

Cautiously I shifted nearer to him again. Under the blankets I slipped my arm over his chest, enjoying the silky feel of his fur.

And then I shifted my whole body on top of him, until I lay warm and naked on his bare chest.

His recitation stopped. "Songbird. What are you doing?"

I sucked in a breath as my hips settled over his, as I felt the true size and girth of his erection under the loincloth. "Gods," I whispered. "Your cock is huge."

His length throbbed under me, and he groaned. "Songbird..."

"Ssshhh." Reaching down, I undid the knot of his cloth wrapping and pushed it aside, readjusting myself until the hot skin of his naked cock was right against the soft flesh of my pussy and my belly. My body came alive, warm arousal flooding my sex, a tingling need waking at my core.

"Oh gods," I whimpered. "Your fur feels amazing, and your cock... ah..." Still chest to chest, my breasts against his massive pectorals, I rolled my hips, rubbing the wet lips of my sex along his length.

He moaned, his giant paws grasping my waist. "Fuck, Songbird."

"Fuck yes," I breathed. "Fuck me, Caswell, please. Please fuck me. I need you."

He stilled beneath me. "But you had Everston already. You want him."

"No." I pressed my hand over his muzzle. His bullish lips were velvety and damp—they did not disgust me at all, so I pushed myself higher and pressed a soft kiss onto them. "Right now, I want you. Don't think so hard about it. This doesn't have to mean anything, or change anything. Just pleasure, because we want it. That's all."

"I'm too big for you," he said.

I suspected he might be right—but the thought of having that thickness inside me was too delicious to resist. "Try," I told him.

"Let me prepare you first." Gripping my waist more firmly, he dragged me up his body and settled my thighs astride his great muzzle. I gasped at the ticklish sensation of his hair, at the pliant softness of his lips.

And then his tongue emerged—broad and covered in tiny bumps, sweeping over my entire sex. I shrilled a frantic whine, and he licked me again, a rumble of pleasure vibrating through his monstrous body.

His tongue swirled over my folds, then lapped at the nub of my clit while little sobs of helpless pleasure broke from my lips.

"Have you done this—with a woman—in this form?" I asked.

"No," he murmured against my pussy.

"So you're a virgin in this form."

"Mm." He slathered me with his tongue again, and my eyes rolled back in my head.

"Gods, Caswell," I whimpered. For a moment I wondered if he was forcing himself to do this, if I was disgusting in that area. I'd tried to stay clean, but without a decent bath lately...

"You taste like rain and flowers." He nuzzled against me, then grazed my clit with the flat of his broad tongue against. "I could devour you whole."

I almost laughed with relief, with the knowledge that he and I could be grimy and earthy together, that my natural scent was delicious to him.

My pussy was drenched, dripping into his mouth. "Please, Caswell, please..."

Growling his agreement, he moved me off his muzzle and onto the pile of pelts, draping a few of them over my chest for warmth, but leaving me bare from the waist down.

His bull's head and his huge form were outlined by the dim glow of the lamp. His fur was practically haloed, his horns sharp against the light. His dark eyes gleamed as he knelt on the blankets, curling his paws around my ankles, spreading my legs wide for him. Between his furred thighs hung his thick cock, a bit of clear liquid leaking from its tip.

"If you want this to stop, tell me," he rumbled.

"Don't stop," I whispered. "Don't stop."

He released one of my ankles and pressed the fat head of his cock into my slit. Deeper he eased, while my slick channel stretched to accommodate him.

So much bigger than Everston had been.

The pressure built until it began to hurt. "Stop, stop," I gasped. "Wait a moment."

He went still. When I lifted my head and looked down, I saw that I had barely taken any of him inside me.

"Shit," I whispered. "Oh, fuck."

With the knuckle of his thumb, Caswell jiggled my clit, and I cried out at the thrilling stimulation. My thighs and inner walls relaxed more, and the massive cock moved farther into my hole, pushing inexorably deeper.

"I love your clit," said Caswell, low. "It is so swollen, so needy."

His filthy words sent another rush of liquid lust between my thighs, and he sank deeper still, with a visceral groan of aching bliss. He kept circling my clit with his knuckle, careful not to touch me with so much as one claw.

"You are exquisite," he murmured. "Divine. My—my savior, whether you break the curse or not."

My heart broke for him, because I'd told him this was only pleasure, that it wouldn't mean anything, or change anything. I wasn't sure I loved him, or Everston. But I cared. I cared about him so deeply.

"Give me everything," I whispered. "All of you. Don't hold back, don't be embarrassed. I want it all."

With a bullish grunt, he pushed the rest of the way into me. Little thrills of ecstasy circled outward through my belly from his continual massage of my clit, and with the added fullness inside me, I was trembling right on the edge, vibrating and nearly sobbing in that moment of perfect, sparkling anticipation just before the release.

And then he drew himself out halfway, slowly, and he thrust.

When he rammed into me, he struck something deep inside—a hidden spot, impossibly sensitive. I shrieked a little, and he paused, dark eyes searching my face with sweet concern.

"Don't stop," I gasped. "Again, please, oh please."

With a grating rumble, he began to rut into me, violent, bestial, his thickness rubbing hot and hard through me. With each pump, the head of that massive cock kissed the tender spot inside my body, and it radiated bliss, sending the most exquisite thrills into my belly and breasts. He hung over me, smelling of rich musk and earth and rain.

This was better than Everston. Fuller, richer, sweeter, and at the same time more brutal, more vital.

Caswell was huffing, grunting, growling like a beast in heat, and those primal sounds, coupled with the increased pace of his thrusts, finished me.

Star-bright ecstasy cracked through me, quaking my entire body. I screamed. I shook. I twisted, while he held me still and used me, fucked me mercilessly through the aftershocks of my orgasm, milked out every bit of my pleasure.

"I'm coming," he growled. "Fuck, I'm coming—" And he bellowed so loudly the hut creaked with the force of the sound. I felt a great, hot rush of cum spewing into me, his cock flexing and surging. His paws curled into fists against the blankets while he heaved through the bliss.

When our bodies separated, cum poured out of me. I lay panting, stretched and sated, for the moment.

Caswell collapsed at my side. "Did I hurt you?"

"Gods no." I dragged myself against him, and he laid one heavy arm across my body. "I took it all, didn't I?"

"You did." He sounded impressed. And there was another sound in his voice, too—a new emotion.

Relief.

After a moment I said, "That was such fun, I almost want to do it again."

A rich laugh rolled from him. "I need a little time, Songbird. But if you're not too sore, then yes—I would do it again."

"Good." I snuggled against him, wondering at how different I felt this time. After sex with Everston I'd felt good—not ashamed, but a little empty, perhaps. He'd left me so quickly. I'd been physically sated, but emotionally unsettled.

With Caswell, my heart felt just as refreshed as my body. Curled against his chest, with his arm curved protectively over me, I felt gloriously happy and safe. I never wanted the feeling to end.

"While we're waiting for that beautiful cock of yours to recover, why don't you tell me a story?" I asked.

"Don't know any stories."

"That can't be true."

"I've lived alone in a garden for a century. I've forgotten every story I knew."

I lifted my head and looked him in the eyes—such beautiful dark eyes. "I think there's one story you still remember. And it's one I need to hear, Caswell. If you and your brother want to be truly loved, you need to be honest."

"You think true love is honest?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "But I think—yes, I think it should be."

"And you wish to hear the story of the great sin Everston and I committed, the one that doomed us to this fate."

"Yes"

"Be careful what you wish for," he muttered.

And then he began the tale.



"Everston and I both had our fill of women in the old days," said Caswell. "We were princes—handsome ones—twins. Our kingdom was prosperous and our parents were kind, beloved by their subjects. So we had no lack of beautiful women in our beds. Everston was the more charismatic of us two, and he had magic, so the ladies tended to cluster around him first—and then the ones he rejected would come to me."

"That must have been hard," I said, propping myself on one elbow. The lamp was still burning, and I could see his craggy furred features by its glow. But his long lashes shaded his eyes so I couldn't read his emotions as well as usual.

"I was not neglected," said Caswell. "Though I felt an occasional pang of jealousy, especially when Andralia arrived among us."

"Andralia?"

"She arrived during a midsummer revel one night. Our parents had gone south to help villages ravaged by tornados, and of course Everston and I thought it the perfect time to throw the wildest, most debauched party we'd ever concocted. An inappropriate and foolish decision, of course, but at the time we thought it was a delicious mischief."

He chuffed out a long breath through his muzzle. "As I said, we had all the women we wanted in those days—females of every color, shape, and personality, in every position you can imagine. Everston had begun introducing a little magic to enhance the pleasure for both parties, and I was considering taking more than one body to bed, just to add some spice to the routine."

At Caswell's confession, a heated flush coated my skin beneath the blankets, and my pulse centered between my legs, throbbing insistently, eager for more pleasure. But I tried to focus on his next words, because he sounded deeply mournful.

"Andralia was the daughter of a Faerie King, though we didn't know it at the time. We could sense there was something special about her, though. When she arrived, Everston and I ducked aside to discuss who would have the rights to her that night, if she were amenable to such doings. Neither of us were willing to give ground—she was so exquisitely beautiful, with an exuberance and joy that radiated from her smile throughout the entire room.

"And then Everston had his great and terrible idea. Why could we not *both* have her? We were twins, after all. How was she to know one of us from the other? And so it was settled. Everston would charm her and take his pleasure, and then he would slip out of the room while I entered and took mine."

I gaped at Caswell, my arousal forgotten. The thought of two identical men having me sounded fascinating—but an odd sense of wrongness pervaded the idea too. Little as I knew of sex, I suspected that tricking someone in matters of lovemaking was a very bad thing.

Caswell continued. "Andralia was not so easily won. It took Everston two days and three nights of constant pursuit and attentions to get her into his bed, while I stayed out of their way so she wouldn't realize we were twins.

"When Everston finally made love to her, I waited in the hallway outside while the sounds of their pleasure crested and waned. At last Everston came out of the bedroom on the pretext of fetching wine and food for her with his own hands, rather than calling a servant.

"I had a tray of cakes and wine ready, and my hair was styled like his. Everston gave me his dressing gown, as we had agreed, but he looked pained. He asked if I still wanted to go through with our pact to share Andralia. She was exquisite, he said, and he wanted her to be only his.

"I was drunk, my mind slow and foolish. I scoffed at him, thinking his reluctance was only his usual selfishness. He yielded and agreed that we should finish what we'd started. So after a few minutes I entered the bedroom in his place.

"Andralia and I ate together, and then I began to tease her beautiful body. She was shocked and pleased at my supposed stamina, that I should be ready again so soon after the first coupling. She gave herself to me eagerly while Everston listened outside.

"When Andralia fell asleep, I let Everston in. He and I lay down on either side of her, so as to surprise her in the morning. We thought she'd laugh at the matched pair of us, but instead she was enraged. This was no mere prank, she told us, but a deceit of the most horrible kind. She maintained that she had not agreed to bed me, but only Everston. My brother argued that she was as clear-minded and consenting as ever when she welcomed me between her legs. I will never forget how they screamed at each other, or the growing sense of horror and uncertainty in my own heart as I realized that maybe, in our pursuit of mischief and pleasure, we had done an irreparable wrong.

"A moment later, Andralia's form altered, and she towered over both of us, terrible and vicious, with great ivory bat-wings snapping out from her back and spreading on either side. She cursed us like the beasts we'd been, and gave us different forms so no one would confuse us for each other again. Our entire castle and everyone in it transformed that same hour. And here we have remained, ever since, waiting for a woman who might find it in her heart to love one of us wretches."

Caswell lurched up, heaving his great bulk out of the furs and blankets. "And now you know my original sin, my greatest shame."

With a low roar of agony, he tromped to the door, gripping it as if he would charge out into the icy rain.

"Wait!" I leaped up, bare as I was, and ran to him, clasping his arm with both my hands. "You did a terrible thing. I will not excuse it, nor can I forgive it, since the offense was not against me. But I see that you regret it deeply, Caswell. You have suffered for it, perhaps beyond what you deserved. A hundred years of loneliness and torment. Surely you deserve a little happiness now."

He chuffed angrily, turning his face away from mine. No longer did I think of his face as monstrous—it was dear to me, and I hated to see him in pain.

"A night of forgetting," I whispered. "One night where you refuse to torture yourself for what you did so long ago. You would never do such a thing again. You are wiser now, and calculated in your choices—I've seen it. You've changed. Let yourself have this, with me. Just for tonight."

He gave a long, ragged sigh.

"Come, beautiful beast," I murmured. "Drag me into your bed and rut me. Fill me up until my scent is yours."

A growl began in his chest, intensifying, rising.

Smiling at him, I backed away, retreating to the bed. I lay down on my belly, my face turned aside, and I lifted up my rear so he had a full view of my sex.

His hooves shook the floor as he approached. Grasped my hips with his paws, his nails dragging lightly over my skin. I quivered, eager and wet for him.

With a wolf's growl he entered me. The passage was easier this time, and a thunderous hum of satisfaction vibrated through him. He slammed forward, hunched his great body over mine, and began a quick, brutal fucking that melted my mind, sending me into a dizzy haze of pleasure. He was panting harshly, loudly, a beast abandoned to the mating instinct, and I loved it just as much as I'd loved our emotional connection earlier.

He didn't touch my clit, but I didn't need it, because he kept pounding that thrilling spot inside me, and because the rush of his cock through my folds was stimulation enough. I came with a shuddering gasp, and then—as he continued fucking me, I came again. The pleasure was keener the second time, searing through me like a hot knife.

Caswell reached under my body and cupped my breast, and he came violently, groaning, growling, his thighs and hips shaking against my bottom. He pumped me full of his release, and I sank onto the blankets afterward, too dazed with bliss to care about the cum seeping out of me.

He settled in beside me, nuzzling my cheek and lips gently, a soft possessive growl soothing me as my eyes closed.

I slept fitfully, my sleep striated with dreams of vindictive Faeries and foolish, pleasure-hungry princes.

When I finally woke for good, pale streams of dawn light twinkled through the half-open door of the cottage. Caswell must have gone out early.

I got up and used water from a bucket to wash. I desperately craved a hot bath like the one I'd enjoyed in the castle, but there was no such luxury out here in the gardens. Caswell had no stove, and he cooked very little. When he did consent to "scorching" the vegetables, as he called it, I roasted them over an open fire pit—which was not conducive to the heating of large quantities of water.

I put on a simple white dress Everston had given me—an impractical color for a girl who hadn't bathed in weeks, who spent her days working in the dirt with a bull-man. I didn't bother trying to do anything with the snarls of my yellow hair.

Feeling dirty, tired, and pleasantly sore, I walked the path to the kitchen yard and sat down on the doorstep. It wasn't Everston's time to deliver goods and gifts, but I felt drawn to him. I wanted him to know that Caswell had told me everything.

Tentatively I reached up and tried the door handle.

It yielded to my touch, and I froze in shock.

Everston had left the kitchen door unlocked.

I hadn't thought to try the handle in days. How long had it been unlocked, and I hadn't realized it?

If Everston was willing to see me, why hadn't he simply left the door open?

Maybe he was testing me, to see if I really wanted to connect with him again. Or maybe leaving the door unlocked was an oversight.

I got to my feet and opened the kitchen door.

No magic stopped me. I felt no vibration of shattered spellwork.

The kitchen was quiet, motes of glimmering dust floating in the morning light from the doorway. Something stirred in the corner—not a rat, but a broom and a dustpan, shifting slightly as if I'd woken them from a nap.

I took a few more cautious steps. On the broad wooden table lay a loaf of bread with a large knife beside it. A couple jars of jam sat nearby. Conjured jam it must be, for I doubted that any preserved food could have lasted a century.

Near the food stood a beautiful pair of boots, finely crafted and just my size. I smiled, because Everston had heard me through the

door when I spoke to him yesterday. He'd been listening.

But I didn't put the boots on, not yet, because something else drew my attention.

On the kitchen counter, in a vase under a bell jar, a velvety rose bloomed—my magical rose, the one I'd picked when I first arrived. It looked a bit worse for wear. Several petals lay around the vase, their edges blackened and curled.

"Everston?" I called softly.

When he didn't answer, I tore off a chunk of the bread and nibbled it while I moved closer to the rose. Carefully I lifted the bell jar and set it aside.

The rose smelled as deliciously irresistible as ever. Bending nearer, I inhaled deeply.

"Don't touch it," said a voice behind me. "You'll only hasten its demise—and yours."

My stomach jumped, and I turned slowly around.

Everston stood there on his reptilian legs, his sharply beautiful face just as toothy and serpentine as I remembered. He wore some drapery around his hips and thighs, but otherwise his body was bare. His mane of blues spines flexed and glowed slightly as I approached him.

"Everston," I said. "I know everything now. Caswell told me all about Andralia—about the horrible prank you two played on her."

Pain and regret twisted his features. "I didn't want you to know. I've never told anyone the whole story."

"You didn't force her to do anything," I said.

"But it was wrong. I shared a woman with my own *brother*. At different times, of course, not together—but still."

I blushed, thinking of what Caswell and I did last night. Was it wrong for me to have had them both?

"I suppose the idea was vaguely titillating at the time," Everston said. "Caswell and I were both so jaded that we were hungry for anything new and illicit. But we did it under false pretenses. That is the worst of it all."

I nodded, biting my lip. They should not have tricked her. "But you've both suffered for nearly a century. Isn't that long enough?"

"Apparently not." Everston dragged a claw along the tabletop. "And where is my beast of a brother now?"

"He went out early this morning." I hated that I could not control my deepening blush.

"You fucked him." Shock and wonder threaded Everston's tone. "You fucked him, in his bull form? Just as he is?"

"I did." I lifted my gaze to his, defiant. "And why shouldn't I?"

Everston's sharp features softened. "You love him."

"I—I don't know." My cheeks burned hotter and I averted my eyes from his invasive gaze. "How does anyone know such things? It's far too soon, isn't it? Love doesn't happen that fast."

"It can happen over many long years or in a moment of time," Everston said dully. "For me, it happened in just two days."

"Two days?" I frowned. "Are you talking about—about me?"

He laughed, a raw, hissing reverberation through his throat and teeth. "No, darling. Well, I suppose I do love you, in a way. I've cared about you since you looked at me without fear and touched me that first night—since you showed such joy over the library. I could love you, I think, given enough time."

"If not me, then whom do you mean?" I asked curiously. "Did you love one of the other women who have been guests here?"

"In my own way I felt affection for each of them, I suppose. But in your absence, sweet Lyrical, I've come to see myself in a clearer light. After a hundred years, I finally have perspective, and I understand something I didn't before."

"You're talking in riddles." I crumbled my crust of bread into crumbs. "And I'm too tired for games. Please—speak clearly."

"I loved her," he said. "Andralia, the Faerie Princess—I loved her. Standing outside that room so long ago, listening while she gave herself to Caswell—it was the greatest pain I'd ever felt. I played it off then, tried to ignore it and go through with the prank. After the curse, I prayed to her often, begged for release, and told her I loved her. I thought that vow of affection was only a ruse, in case she might be watching and might take pity on me. I couldn't genuinely

acknowledge my feelings then, even to myself. And perhaps that's why none of the women I've entertained since then have ever truly loved me—because I was reserving part of my heart, and they could sense it. I loved Andralia. I still do."

It didn't pain me at all when Everston declared his love for the Fae sorceress who cursed him. That was how I knew for certain I didn't love him, not with the agonizing, all-consuming passion he seemed to feel for Andralia even now, after a century. But I cared about him deeply, so when tears began to leak from his eyes, I went to him and carefully put my arms around his body, cautious of the spines along his back.

"Can you forgive me?" he whispered brokenly. "Can you forgive my outburst that night, when you came to my rooms?"

"Of course I can." I patted his shoulder, still hugging him. "I already have."

"It was inexcusable," he continued. "Like my own existence. Like my banishment of Caswell—like my creation of those abominable roses."

At the mention of the roses, I drew back from him a little. "That's one thing you haven't explained yet. When I first arrived, you told me to keep my rose safe, and just now you warned me not to touch it. How is this rose linked to me? What will happen to me when it dies?"

His lips parted, and his tongue skittered between his sharp teeth for a second before he answered. "When there are only a few petals left, you'll begin to feel strange. You'll find hair growing thickly in places where it shouldn't, and you might develop additional eyes or limbs. That's only the beginning of the change."

Cold dread seeped into my heart. "The change?"

His serpent's tail writhed behind him, coiling with anxiety. He wouldn't look me in the eyes. "The women who come here, who pluck the roses—eventually each one transforms into a welaway."

Blood roared in my ears, pounded in my skull.

"Wait," I breathed, backing away. "Wait, what are you saying? That every girl who came in here—each one of them turned into one of *those*—those hideous demons?"

"When it starts to happen, I put them in a cell in the dungeon, one with a secret passage that leads out beyond the grounds," Everston said. "They transform, and then they run out into the wild."

"You," I gasped. "You've been *making* those things and setting them free?"

"It wasn't something I ever wanted to happen. It was an unintended effect of my magic." His voice was strident with desperation, the hiss of his syllables more pronounced. "I didn't realize what the price of the spell would be until the first girl changed. And even when I understood the cost, I was too desperate to break the curse. I wanted a chance at love. At freedom."

"You destroyed those women, and then you let the demons out to destroy even more lives!" I screamed. "One of the welaways killed my mother!"

Everston's pale skin went a shade whiter. "I'm sorry. I didn't know"

I could hardly suck in breaths. My lungs spasmed, and my stomach twisted with terror. "Maybe it won't happen to me. I'm immune to magic, right?"

"You're immune to barrier magic," Everston said gently. "Your connection with the rose is intact."

"How do you know?"

"Because I can watch you through it. I watched you enter the kitchen today."

"You can watch me?"

"The rose is linked to a scrying ball in my rooms. Through it, I watched you traverse the gardens and come to me on that first day. I watched you sit before the fire. I watched you—" he swallowed, flushing—"I watched you bathe."

"Bastard," I hissed. "How dare you?"

"I know!" he shrieked, his voice spiking into an inhuman register. "I know what I am. I confess this so you will understand that the spell, the tether—it remains secure. When the last few petals fall, you will change. I'm so sorry."

When Everston pronounced my doom, I could scarcely comprehend it. I felt as if my heart would thunder straight out of my

chest and plop, pulsing and bleeding, onto the floor at his feet.

I shook my head rapidly, tears starting in my eyes. "No. No, this is —undo it." I rushed forward, gripping his scaly wrists. "You have to break the spell, tear up the rosebushes. Something."

"Too much of my blood and power went into that spellwork," he said. "If I broke it forcefully, I could die."

"Isn't that what you want, though?" I snapped. "Both of you have longed to die, to end this suffering. Now is your chance. You can free me, and end your torment at the same time."

Even as I spoke, I couldn't believe I was really urging him to do this—to end his own life to set me free. A sacrifice like that wasn't the sort of thing people did for each other—especially not people who had only known each other for a few weeks. No one had ever loved me enough to bleed for me.

"There's a chance you wouldn't die," I added, more quietly. "Maybe Andralia's curse would help you survive."

"Maybe." His shoulders slumped. "I considered shattering the spellwork a few times, to save the women, but—I would have had to enter the gardens, and I couldn't face Caswell. And truth be told, I was so sure I could win the girls, every time. I was convinced I could claim their hearts, right up until the change began, and by then it was too late. Even breaking the spell wouldn't have stopped the transformation once it began." More tears slid from his eyes, trailing along the harsh ridges of his cheekbones and chin. "Every time one of them turned, I wanted to break the spell, but then I thought, *Just once more. I'll try one more time.* For myself, and for Caswell. I thought if I could break my own curse, I'd be able to find a way to restore him, too."

Everston sank to the floor, bowed over in the agony of his grief and guilt, clutching his stomach with claws that sank through his pale flesh. Scarlet rivulets of blood ran from the wounds.

Such a wreck he was, mutilated inside and out by his own deeds. I wasn't sure that a being so twisted could be redeemed. He certainly didn't deserve redemption.

But he'd been so young when it all happened. And he'd spent the better part of the century alone, captive to his own perverted wisdom, with no one to steady his moral compass or correct him when he veered into selfishness or cruelty.

Hissing and sobbing, with tears and saliva dripping from his lips, Everston hunched further into himself, driving his claws deeper into his bowels.

Horrified, I crumpled beside him and took his wrists again. Gently I eased his talons out of his own skin.

His head whipped toward me, blazing eyes and razor teeth. "Even now you pity me," he hissed. "Even now you are too gracious, too kind. Who are you, Lyrical? What are you?"

"I am only myself," I whispered. "And not for long, apparently. How much time do I have?"

"I don't know. It's different for everyone. Some lasted only a few weeks, others much longer."

A deep, icy calm settled over me, a kind of frozen, implacable shell. I rose, took a musty cloth from one of the kitchen drawers, and handed it to him. "Wipe your face."

He obeyed, while I stared at the bleeding, scaly, swollen-eyed mess of him.

"We need to tell Caswell what's going to happen to me." My voice sounded distant, frigid. "He has the right to know."

Everston groaned. "Oh gods. This is going to break him."



I hadn't had the courage to face Lyrical since last night, when I confessed my most terrible sin to her. Once she'd had rest and time to think, she couldn't be as understanding as she had been last night, could she? No, she would look at me with judgment and disgust, and I couldn't bear to see it.

As if I weren't monstrous enough, with my bull's head and legs, and my wolfish paws—I was also the perpetrator of a grotesque prank Everston and I had played on an unsuspecting girl.

I'd been an idiot of a prince, hungry for power, jealous of Everston, painfully bored of everything. I'd felt stuck—unable to ascend to my birthright since my father was healthy and competent, and also unable to gain the same awed admiration that Everston commanded among our people. I'd been popular enough, yet I felt unseen. First-born, yet always the second choice. I'd wanted Andralia almost as badly as Everston did, and I had told myself having his leftovers was better than not having her at all.

So I'd taken her—sown my seed where he'd sown his. She'd been so eager for it that I didn't stop to think how wrong it was.

My gut wrenched, nausea forcing bile up my throat. I lurched over to a nook between two flowerbeds and vomited on the moss there. The sounds I made were horrible, wretched, bestial.

I collapsed on the paving stones, utterly broken, my soul an aching void clamoring for redemption, for another chance.

How long I lay there, I didn't know.

But at some point, a soft voice entered the haze of my misery.

"Caswell."

I lifted my great brutish head, and there was Lyrical, standing in the opening of a hedge.

Behind her stood my brother, sharp teeth and flickering tongue, lizard feet and writhing tail.

Hauling myself upright, I glared at Everston. "Why is he here?"

"We have something to tell you," said Lyrical.

"You love him." My voice cracked. "Despite everything, you found it in your heart to love him. Well, go ahead—say it. Break the curse. Condemn me to this form for eternity. Go on—I deserve it."

"It's not that." Lyrical held my gaze with her own.

She wasn't flushed, and her eyes didn't sparkle with love and happiness. She was bone-white, and in her eyes shone the cold light of despair, of inevitability.

A tremor rippled over me. "What is it?"

"Everston explained what happens to the girls who come here," she said. "The rose spell he created—when it has run its course, the girls turn into welaways. He has been releasing them into the woods through a secret tunnel under the castle. And in a short time, I will also transform into one of the demons. There's no way to break the spell without Everston dying."

My mind whirled through the phrases she'd spoken, repeating them over and over.

Everston began to speak, explaining in a thin, strained voice about the magic he'd used, and how its effects would likely supersede even the restorative power of Andralia's spell. The magic that kept us healed, kept us alive to our torment—it wouldn't save him. If he shattered the spell of the roses, he would die. But it was possible Lyrical could be saved. Not certain, but possible.

The welaways. My brother was responsible for creating them—or some of them, at least.

The women who had entered our domain—they had all turned into demons.

And Lyrical—my Beauty, my Songbird—this woman of persistence and will-power, with a mind like an abundant garden and a heart bigger than a kingdom—this woman would metamorphose into a slavering, unthinking, ravenous monster.

I released a wretched, broken sound, half-bellow, half-sob, and I staggered against the ivy-covered stone wall.

"No," I moaned. "She is—you see what she is, Everston." I stared at Lyrical, clad in a simple white dress, her golden hair tumbling loose and tangled, her feet bare and smudged against the packed dirt of the path. "She is a treasure, a queen. She can't become one of those creatures—not her. Please—" But I knew, even as I begged, that he wouldn't save her. He was too selfish for that. He hadn't saved any of the other women, and Lyrical would be no exception. Everston would always care about Everston first, and no one else.

My rage spurted up, and I welcomed it, because it blurred the haunting agony of my breaking heart.

This was Everston's fault. All of it, from the moment he proposed the trick on Andralia—everything was his fault.

"You ruined my life." The words ripped from me in a low growl.

"Believe me, brother, no one could blame me more than I blame myself," said Everston. "But you played a part in this. You had a choice. You wanted Andralia so badly you didn't even try to talk me out of it—and you could have. You could have let me have her. When I came out of that room, I told you I didn't want to share her with you—and you insisted."

"You were both wrong," said Lyrical, stepping between us. "Arguing over it doesn't help us now. Look, what if I manage to break your curse? Does that free me from the rose's influence?"

"Yes," Everston said. "I designed the rose to relinquish its connection once the terms of Andralia's curse were fulfilled."

"You did that, yet you couldn't foresee the women turning into welaways?" I spat. "Some sorcerer you are."

"I was young when this happened," snapped Everston. "I knew a lot, but I never completed my training. I've done the best I could with the knowledge I have."

"Your best is shit." I took a menacing step toward him.

"And you live in *shit*," he retorted. "You think I don't know? I've watched you from the castle windows. I've seen you squatting and pissing like an animal, using your offal to nurture the plants. I've seen you pawing at your dick, desperate to reach a moment's

pleasure. You disgust me. At least I tried to retain my humanity—you let yourself sink into filth."

"I had no *choice*. You barred me from my home, and from all humanizing things. You wouldn't even give me my own possessions."

"Because you would have broken and destroyed them," Everston hissed. "You've got those great clumsy paws—"

"As if yours are any better. How you managed to pleasure the women without killing them is beyond me."

Everston let his forked tongue wriggle out between his teeth. He flicked it lazily. "You can't guess how I managed it? I have a tongue, a tail, and a magnificent dick. Use your imagination. And what would *you* have done with the girls? Thrust your giant bullish self into them? Lapped them with that cow's tongue of yours? I suppose that's what you did to poor Lyrical last night."

He laughed mockingly, and even though I could hear his pain in the sound, I couldn't hold back any longer. I launched myself at him, roaring my fury, and I ripped his pale chest with my claws.

He sank his own claws into my back, and I bellowed at the sharp agony. We rolled over, twisting and thrashing. His spines and sharp edges tore my flesh, while my horns raked the side of his face. I could see nothing but my own blinding red rage, and the flurry of scales, skin and talons that was my brother.

Lyrical was screaming at us to stop. But we didn't stop—not until my muscles were shredded and my guts were bulging through lacerations in my chest and stomach. Not until he was sliced open, limbs at strange angles, leaking copious amounts of blood onto the ground.

Everston and I rolled apart, wrecked and groaning. I'd torn his eyes and throat, and snapped bones in both his arms. His face was a mask of blood.

This was the fight we'd waited a hundred years to have. We'd finally killed each other—except thanks to the curse, we wouldn't die

"I'm s-s-sorry," Everston gurgled through bloody, broken teeth.

Shock blazed along my frayed nerves. The wet, huffing sounds he was making sounded like sobs—hard to tell with all the blood—but

still.

My brother didn't apologize. Ever.

And yet.

I swallowed a mouthful of bitter blood and choked, "I'm sorry too."

"Great. Wonderful." Lyrical stood over us, her hands on her hips. "You're both sorry. And you're both mortally wounded. So you're going to have to lie here like big helpless babies and heal while I think of something to fix our problems."

She paced back and forth for a second, then said, "What if I just—say the words? What if I tell you, Caswell—" she knelt beside me in the blood and dirt—"that I love you? I love you."

My entire body froze, vibrating with the shock of Lyrical's words.

I love you.

Hope burst white in my chest.

But when nothing happened, that glorious light faded into sickening darkness again.

"It won't work," Everston wheezed. "The curse knows when the words are true. And they are obviously not, or I would be hearing you squeal for joy."

"I don't squeal for joy," Lyrical said, and Everston replied thickly, "Not talking about you. Talking about Caswell. He'd be squealing for joy."

I snorted and then hacked up more blood. Everything hurt so badly I could barely stay conscious.

"But I *want* it to be true," murmured Lyrical. "I want to love you." Her fingers brushed my torn shoulder. "I care about both of you."

"It's not enough," whispered Everston.

The three of us stayed there a long time—Everston and I caught in the throes of painful healing, Lyrical snared in the dread of her impending doom.

After a while she brought a book from the castle and read to us, a long story of warring nations and a stolen bride who won the heart of her captor. It was all very romantic and sickening—though I

thought perhaps if I had not been so desperate for love myself, I might have enjoyed it.

Then Lyrical brought blankets from the castle as well, and she slept between us. I suffered through another hour or two of agony before dozing off myself, knowing that when I woke, my healing would be nearly completed.

I woke to my Songbird's hands on my shoulders. She was shaking me as violently as my massive size would allow.

"Wake up, you big brute," she said. "Everston's gone."

"Small wonder," I growled. "He probably shut himself in the castle again."

"I don't think so." She pointed to the ground, and I propped myself up on my elbows so I could see what she was indicating. A couple of clawed footprints, three-toed and splayed like a lizard's, headed west, toward the outer reaches of the hedge maze.

"The rosebushes lie in that direction, don't they?" Lyrical stared at me with raw panic in her eyes. "Do you think he's going to try to break the spell?"

"Maybe."

"We can't let him do that!"

"Why not?" I lay back on the damp ground. "It's only right that he try to fix the harm he caused."

"And if he dies?"

I chuffed harshly. "Why should I care? He hasn't been a brother to me in decades."

"But he loves you," she said. "And you love him."

"Why do you think that? Because we're brothers?" I sat up again, shaking the dew off my shaggy head and my shoulders. "You had sisters, and did they try to stop you from being sold to slavers? Did they love you, just because you were blood-related?"

Her teeth pinched her lower lip. "No."

"Well, there you have it. Blood does not equal love."

"I can't let him die for me," she whispered.

A tremor of tenderness raced through my chest. I longed to wrap her in my arms and hold her close, but after everything, she would probably push me away. She'd be right to do it.

"He is only doing what I would do, if my sacrifice could fix anything," I said gently. "You may not love my brother, but I think he loves you."

She shook her head. "Everston loves Andralia."

My lower jaw sagged with astonishment. "What? The Faerie who cursed us? Did he *say* he loves her?"

Lyrical nodded. "I think he's loved her all along. It's why he couldn't form a true connection with any of the women. And they knew he didn't really love them or want them, so they couldn't love him back."

"The gods-damned idiot," I growled, lurching to my feet and hitching what remained of my loincloth into place. The flush painting Lyrical's cheeks told me she'd gotten an eyeful of my parts while I was sleeping. But fucking her again was the last thing on my mind.

Or it should have been. But when she moved into my space and laid her small hand on my chest, my whole body trembled for her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't mean it yet." She frowned slightly, stroking my breast absently with her fingers. "I want to, Caswell. I do."

"It doesn't matter." I struggled to control myself as her hands moved higher, her fingers sinking into the rough fur around my neck. She was tugging at me, pulling my face down to hers.

And then she pressed her lips to my muzzle. Kissing me.

The fate that had seemed so dark and inescapable yesterday felt lighter and less inevitable with her lips on mine, with the sun sparkling around us and the damp earth sending up fresh scents of life and growth. That was the magic of mornings. They brought ridiculous, illogical hope to the heart.

And the glittering, verdant morning made me wonder if maybe I didn't want Everston to die after all.

"Come on," I grumbled against Lyrical's soft mouth. "Let's go after my brother."



I'd craved death before.

And I'd longed for a chance at redemption.

It never occurred to me that I would find both, wrapped in one beautiful package.

I stood in the courtyard where I'd planted the magical rosebushes, and I stared at them, glimmering in their perpetual haze of enchanted golden light. A heavy, lush fragrance unspooled from their petals, brushing my nostrils, caressing my mind. Their allure was so powerful I was nearly tempted to pluck one myself.

This spell was truly my greatest and most despicable achievement.

And I had to destroy it all, before it destroyed anyone else.

The forcible breaking of a spell or curse was a terrible thing. My instructors had told me so, and I'd experienced it first-hand when Lyrical shattered the barrier spell around the castle. Spells and curses were inlaid with specific paths and patterns through which they functioned, by which they could be released. If you had the power to cross that magic, if you assaulted and tore it, the original creator suffered the backlash. And a spell like this, woven into my blood and brain, synchronized to Andralia's curse—well. No matter how much I tried to rationalize otherwise, I knew in my heart that shattering it would be the end of me.

My death would give Lyrical and Caswell a chance. She wouldn't turn into a demon, and they could live in the castle together, growing closer until the day she realized she truly did love him.

He loved her already, that much was clear. I'd never seen such raw pain in anyone's eyes when he'd begged me to save her, when he called her a treasure and a queen. Dirty and disheveled as she was, he could see her worth, as I did. And I recognized in him the same soul-gutting passion I saw in the mirror, whenever I thought of Andralia.

Andralia would never want me. She had probably forgotten all about us, the foolish human princes she'd cursed to an eternity of loveless pain.

She should have killed me back then, for my pride and idiocy, for my disrespect and lustful carelessness.

I deserved this end—a mercy and a sacrifice. Redemption and escape, woven together.

Stretching out both taloned hands, I expanded my consciousness, searching for the tendrils of the enchantment I had laid in this place. I found the twigs of the magic and followed them back to the thicker branches, the gnarled knots, the root ball and its offshoots that extended all the way through the gardens and into the castle itself.

I could feel the rose, sitting in the kitchen in its vase—and I could feel Lyrical, running through the gardens toward me. The spell was coiled in her chest, a black spider of corruption curled around her heart, tethered to the rose and to this place, this courtyard teeming with dark enchantment.

Lyrical was coming to stop me. But I couldn't let her do that. I had to save her and my brother.

With my mind I seized the root ball of the magic, and I began to pull.

The pain prickled along my outstretched arms first—a warning of the agony to come, a voiceless cry of *stop*, *stop*. I pulled harder, and the hairlike threads at the outskirts of the spell began to snap, to pop free from the blood-bound magic holding them in place. My heartbeat stuttered, then picked up again.

I gave a violent wrench, and more roots snapped back, lacerating my soul with blades of broken magic. Sweat burst across my forehead and my limbs trembled.

Could I manage this? Was I even strong enough?

I focused on Caswell's face as it used to be—so exactly like mine, except with a softness in his eyes that I'd never had, a beauty and emotion in his rich voice that I'd never possessed. He was the studious one, serious and gentle. He had kept up with me at parties and revels, but he preferred constructive labor and well-defined results. He liked quiet moments with lovers, cuddling and kissing, while I preferred to vent my passion quickly.

My brother. Given more time to learn wisdom, he would have made a wonderful king.

He deserved another chance.

And Lyrical—sweet, brave Lyrical, intelligent and curious and talkative. She'd come to us as a thin, quiet slip of a thing, with caution and calculation written large across her delicate features. She deserved a life of peace and health—a real education, and someone to love and cherish her

She and Caswell could have that together. Their love would break the curse, free our servants and subjects. Damn me, I'd almost forgotten everyone else who'd been bound to our fate, punished by Andralia simply because of their association with us. Those people deserved their freedom too.

And their prince would give it to them.

I took a fresh mental grip on the core of my spellwork, and I breathed deep, prepared to pull with all my might.

Then a voice, croaky with age, cracked through my concentration. "Please sir—may I have a rose?"

I opened my eyes. Whipped my head toward the sound.

An old woman with a seamed, wrinkled face stood at the edge of the courtyard. One veined hand grasped a cloak around her shoulders, and wisps of her white hair fluttered from the edge of her hood, like pale flags in the breeze.

"A rose," she croaked. "One rose, sir, by your mercy. They are so beautiful, and one such as I has little beauty left in life."

My brain was spinning, trying to make sense of this. Never had a woman of this age been able to find our domain or enter it. All our guests had been young and eligible. Unattached, and close to our age.

How had this elder lady entered the grounds?

"How did you find this place, madam?" I asked. "And how are you not afraid of my form?" I glanced down at myself, suddenly conscious that I was wearing the merest rags around my scaly hips.

The old woman's shriveled mouth stretched in a gap-toothed grin. "I've seen far worse than you, young man."

"I cannot give you a rose," I told her. "My apologies, but they are —special."

"Not even one?" Her white brows bristled. "But you have so many."

"Trust me, you don't want one of these," I said. "They carry pain and torment."

"Yet you planted them. Why?"

"Because I was a fool," I replied shortly. "And now it's time to pay for my foolishness by destroying what I have wrought."

"I don't understand you," quavered the woman. "And I don't know why you're so stingy. It's only one little rose—"

"Hush, please, madam," I said. "If you don't want to see something truly horrific, please go."

"Greedy, selfish boy," she grumbled. She began to back away, slowly.

I renewed my mental grasp on the root ball of the rosebushes. I could see it in my mind's eye—a massive black knot of interwoven magic, pulsing dark red at the center, throbbing with my own lifeblood.

With all my mental powers, I yanked at the bloody core of the spell.

I screamed, and the garden seemed to be screaming with me. Hedges split apart and turf ripped in two, disgorging roots and stones. Pavers cracked and trees canted aside.

My heart was being torn from my body. My blood bubbled like boiling acid through my veins. When I glanced down, I saw sizzling patches bursting out all over my skin, scales flaking off and leaving bloody, raw flesh behind them. Again I hauled on the root of the spell. The roses themselves were shricking—or perhaps it was still me—they were rippling, changing, petals roiling with rot, pus dripping from their leaves. Thorns shot from them like quills and plunged through my skin, a million miniature daggers impaling me.

My mind blurred and blazed, a torment of agony and blood—but I had one strand of purpose left, and I clung to it. I pulled one last time, and with a great cracking and snapping, the entire group of rosebushes exploded from the earth, upended and thrashing like a living thing. Oily black tendrils of dark magic bled from the roots, along with copious amounts of my own blood—I could feel the liquid draining from my very pores as I wavered, sick and fading.

One thick root still joined the rosebush to the earth, to the castle—to Lyrical.

With my final bit of strength I jerked at it—and as fractured, so did my body.

Most of my bones broke, sudden and crooked, jutting through my flesh. I heard my spine snap.

My heart juddered—one final effort—and then it stilled.

As my consciousness faded, I heard Lyrical scream.



I crashed to my knees beside the broken thing that used to be Everston.

His skin was stuck full of thorns—strange, bloody, blackened thorns, and wherever the thorns weren't, splinters of white bone protruded from his limbs and torso. His sleek, elegant face was a mess, bruises blooming all over, raw wounds where scales had been. The ridges under his skin had pushed jaggedly through in places.

My shaking fingers hovered over him, but there was nowhere I could touch him—no way to give him help or comfort.

"He did it," said Caswell hoarsely. "I could always feel it when the girls disappeared, when the rose died. There was a gap—a silence. I feel it now."

I nodded, tears soaking my cheeks. "I felt it too. Like a weight I didn't know was there had been lifted from my heart, or—or a cord cut." My voice was a raw, bleeding thread as I leaned over Everston. "You didn't have to do this for me—for us." I glanced up at Caswell again. Through my grief-blurred eyes, I could see that he was crying too. Great droplets beaded on his furry cheeks, like beads of rain.

"He did this to save you?" asked a quavery voice.

I blinked, turning. I'd registered the old woman's presence dimly, distantly—a foggy shape in the whirlwind of my anxiety for Everston.

Now I really looked at her for the first time. Her lips were tightly pinched, as if she was trying to keep them from trembling.

I wanted to ask how she'd gotten in, where she'd come from—but she deserved an answer first.

"Yes," I answered. "He created this spell, these roses, to give himself a chance at love, but the price was a terrible one. He sacrificed himself so I wouldn't have to pay it, so his brother and I could—have a future—" My words melted into sobs, and I bowed over. My heart felt as if it had been torn in two.

Caswell knelt beside me, awkward on his bullish legs. I pressed my face to the warm human skin of his shoulder, my left cheek halfburied in the shaggy hair of his throat.

His paws closed around me, gentle as ever, strong as always. And even as I grieved for Everston, my heart melded itself to Caswell's, and I felt the quiet thrum of a deep peace, beyond hope or joy or sorrow, and somehow encompassing it all.

"How dare he do this?" said the old woman from behind me. Her voice sounded stronger.

I sucked in a hitching breath. "What do you mean?"

"I finally return after a century, and now—" The woman's voice was definitely different—smoother, younger, deepened with sorrow.

Caswell's chest heaved, and he gave a choking gasp. I whirled around—and the old woman had changed.

Taller than both of us she stood, taller than any human. From her shoulders sprang huge ivory wings, shaped like a bat's but soft-looking, like doeskin. And her face—I had never seen features so flawless. Her skin was fawn-colored, and her hair tumbled in ebony curls down her back. Two white antlers protruded from her brow, and her ears were long, upswept, pointed at the tips.

Her cloak changed from a drab gray covering to a silvery gown like woven moonlight. When she knelt beside Everston, the fabric pooled around her like liquid.

Caswell bowed himself to the ground, his horns nearly scraping the turf. "My lady. Forgive me."

"Quiet, brute." Her tone held the tightness of unshed tears.

"Andralia?" I whispered.

The Faerie Princess didn't even glance at me. Her fingers floated over Everston's brow, and she plucked out one of the thorns. "Lethal magic, this," she said softly. "Impressively complex, for a human. Have you finally learned, you matchless imbecile, and all too late?"



I tried to forget him. I tried for a hundred years.

Loathsome, wretched snake of a man—I tried not to think about him at all. But I found myself performing scrying spells over and over, checking in on him throughout the weeks and months and years, while he lured and laid women, while he sobbed and shrieked his apologies to me, while he played with his magic, trying out new and terrible spellwork.

I watched him sleep.

I watched him slice his own skin to release the pain, or to punish himself.

And my heart twinged with regret, because he had been so full of life and joy before I cursed him. His inner light and buoyancy, his innovative uses of magic, the way he could thrill my entire body with a single touch, the sparkle of his eyes when he laughed—those were the things that had lured my love back then, when I glamoured myself and wandered into the human kingdom in search of something new, something to lighten the dullness of my long existence. I had lived under the dictates of a domineering mother and a careless father for two hundred years, and I wanted my liberty.

I found some measure of freedom among the humans. Their revels were not like those of Faerie, but they had their own earthy charm, a rich sensual allure. I was amused, and so I stayed. In my human disguise, I let the pretty prince taunt and tease me, touch and tantalize me, until my heart and my body softened completely. I'd thought myself truly in love for the first time.

No one told me there were two princes, twins—and somehow, in the dazzling whirl of the palace parties, I hadn't noticed. I only realized it the morning after the lovemaking, when I found myself between two identical men. They woke up, grinning, and told me I'd bedded them both.

My fragile new love for Everston had made the sting of the princes' trick so much worse. And worse still was my own pain at not seeing the truth—because if I had really loved Everston, why had I not seen through the ruse? Why had I not recognized a difference in Caswell immediately? Surely a woman truly in love should have been able to tell the twins apart. I blamed them heartily, but I also blamed myself for succumbing to the trick, for being so bleary with desire that I could not see through the lie.

I hated myself for being vulnerable. For being foolish.

In a way, Everston and Caswell had given me the power to break free from my parents. When I'd gone back to Faerie, flooded with vengeful rage and flush with pride at the curse I'd cast, I had severed ties with my family and found my own cottage in which to live, far from their oppressive control. In that cottage I raged and fumed and spied on Everston with my scrying bowl, spitting the worst swears I knew at the image of his monstrous face.

But my anger faded somewhat with the passage of time.

A hundred years. Not long in the life of a Faerie. Our lives spanned centuries, millennia. Yet as the hundredth anniversary of Everston and Caswell's curse approached, I decided I could wait no longer.

The new girl in the castle, the one called Lyrical—she had disrupted the twins' dynamic. I was fascinated with her, with the way she'd managed to change everything in just a few short weeks.

And truth be told, I wanted to speak with Everston again. To fight with him, yell at him, slap him. Just to be in his presence, inhaling his scent, hearing his laugh, being near enough to touch him. I would hurt him, perhaps, or hug him—I wasn't sure which.

And then, like an idiot, he gave his life for his clod of a brother and the human girl, and he died.

I knew he was dead—I could feel his soul detaching, loosening from his body. Not even the regenerative powers of my curse could pull it back.

I'd spent years fascinated with that soul of his, watching it endure the punishment I'd devised.

And now Everston would be gone. I wouldn't be able to touch him again, either to curse or kiss him. My entire being revolted at the idea, a petulant shrieking *no* reverberating through my bones.

I couldn't heal him, not like this—not with the poison of his own magic filling his veins. He'd gone beyond the restorative spells I wove into the curse.

"You can't do this to me," I told him, my voice shaking. "This can't happen, you poisonous perverse darling, you wicked reprobate, Fae of soul and black heart of my heart—you can't make me love you and then die like this!" I dragged him against me, the thorns in his skin slicing my arms, spilling my blood over his body. "I loved you then, devil," I hissed in his ear. "And I love you now."



My ears twitched, catching Andralia's whisper.

At first I wanted to scoff. She claimed to love him, after what she'd done to both of us?

And then the meaning of the words jolted through my heart like a lightning crack, and I scrambled upright, drawing Lyrical to me, holding her tight against my body. I needed her there, against me, with me, and she pressed herself tighter to my chest even as we both stared at the bleeding Faerie whispering in my dead brother's ear.

For a second I thought nothing would happen. He was too far gone. Past the healing power of Andralia's spells... and perhaps past the reach of the love curse as well.

Perhaps...

And then an explosion of light, as if a sun had burst to life inside his chest

Andralia was thrown back, off him, and all the thorns stuck in his flesh flew outward, raining down on the shattered pavers of the courtyard. I shielded my Songbird from their onslaught.

Heat radiated from Everston's body. Tendrils of blood-dark magic twisted and gnarled with the bright yellow light. For a second I thought the clashing power of the two spells would rip him apart. The backlash of his own shattered enchantment battled with the pure light of Andralia's dispelled curse—one broken by force and the other by love.

Another blinding blast of light. Lyrical pressed her face to my chest, and I cupped her head with my paw, protecting that fragile skull and clever mind of hers.

I could hear something happening—horrific pops and wet smacks, as if something was being remade from bones to skin. And then a chiming sigh, like a million musical voices whispering together.

The light vanished, sucked into itself—just in time for me to see a floating naked body drop to the ground.

For a moment I did not recognize him. It had been too long since either of us had seen our human faces. But my brain caught up to the truth of it, and my memory of our shared features flooded back in.

Our father's angular jaw and bold cheekbones. Our mother's full mouth and straight nose. Golden-brown hair, wavy, and we both wore it the same length—nearly touching our shoulders. Brown eyes like rich soil, that turned to translucent honey in the right light. Muscles sculpted from riding and hunting, from training with sword and bow and staff.

How I missed that body, that face.

And I would never have it again.

He had won love first.

I realized I was sobbing, harsh and heavy, while Lyrical held my hideous form as tightly as she could with her tiny hands.

The Faerie had shrunk away, against a nearby tree that had been dislodged from its spot and was slanting precariously. When Everston's body settled, she crept forward, eyes wide.

Had she realized what she was saying? Had she knowingly broken the curse? Somehow, looking at her stricken face, I doubted it. Her expression was shock mingled with tortured hope.

"You unconquerable devil," she whispered. "Are you alive?"

Everston opened his eyes.

They stared at each other for a long moment, while Lyrical and I held our breath and each other.

Then Everston sat up, and at the same moment Andralia lunged for him. He crashed onto his back again, his arms banded around her while she kissed him, over and over. She may have been biting him too, but he did not seem to care.

Lyrical looked up at me. "Should we go?"

Andralia was astride Everston now, her hips grinding against his.

I cleared my throat. "We should go."

"All the animated objects will be changing back to humans," she reminded me. "They'll be glad, but confused probably—we should talk to them."

As my Songbird led me through the garden toward the castle, I could not help thinking that if things had been different, she would have made a wonderful queen.



Andralia crushed herself against me with a desperate fervor that sent hot need spiraling through me, firing up nerve endings that were already ablaze with wonder and with magic.

"I'm alive," I gasped between her brutal kisses. "How am I alive? And—and human?"

"Because I told you I loved you," she panted, kissing my cheeks. "You obnoxious, exquisite fool. I broke my own curse." She laughed through a sob.

"You love me," I repeated blankly. "But—no, you don't. I—I love *you*. I've loved you for a hundred years, although I only realized it recently. You hate me, remember?"

"Of course I hate you." She tugged my lip with her sharp Fae teeth. "And I love you, too. Both."

"That's terribly toxic," I said, cupping the back of her neck with my fingers—my *fingers*, my wonderful human fingers. "You and I—if we do this, if we're together—we're going to destroy each other, you know."

"Maybe," she said, smiling down at me. "Or maybe we'll remake each other. And unless you want me to curse you again, you'll be quiet while I do something I've dreamed about doing ever since I left this dreadful place."

Still astride me, she hitched up the slithery silk of her gown and reached between my legs.

"Now?" I gasped.

"Now," she hissed at me.

The Fae could be patient, but they were also wild and impulsive. And what she wanted, my restored human body was all too willing to give her.

I was searing hot and hard as rock, ready for her, but I stopped her with a hand to her chest. She stilled, while I cupped the soft heaviness of her breast.

"Before we do this," I said. "I need your word that you won't curse me again."

"A vow?" she asked, her lovely face a storm of heat and lust.

"Yes, a vow. I know the Fae seal their vows with blood, or starlight dances, or sex. Our joining can be the seal of your vow, if you will agree."

"As long as you'll promise not to curse or spell me," she retorted.

"A mutual agreement then," I said, running my thumb in a tender circle over the peak of her breast, through the fragile material. The tiny shrill whimper she released woke a memory in my mind—the first night we were together. She'd been in a different form then—same face, but softened into human aspect, with no wings or antlers. I'd hated and loved that memory for so long. I would erase it now, with this moment.

"This is our first time," I told her firmly.

Andralia looked into my eyes, and tears pooled in hers. "This is our first time." She nodded, biting the full flesh of her beautiful lips until blood wet them. I pulled her mouth down to mine and kissed her—savage sweet thing, wild untameable creature.

"My vindictive queen," I whispered, licking her blood from my lips. "Beloved enemy. I beg your forgiveness for the wrong I have done."

"Granted. And now I'm going to fuck you until we both die," she hissed, lowering herself onto me. As I slid into her, Andralia shrieked and her wings whipped out, rigid and extended, taut with ecstasy.

The velvet heat of her gloved me, compressed me—she felt so exquisite I could barely suck in a shuddering breath. Everything in me groaned with the aching perfection of it.

She rode me fast, her beautiful lithe body surging up and down until I came hard inside her, sobs of pleasure wracking my whole chest, my thighs and stomach tensed and shaking.

She kept going, torturing my sensitive cock, until finally she clenched and spasmed around me. Her nails sank into my chest, drawing blood, while she shuddered through her climax.

Then she collapsed on my body, with my length softening inside her. She kissed me softly, with tears, and cupped her ivory wings around both of us.

"The vow is sealed," she whispered. "You need fear no magic from me."

"Nor you from me."

She smiled against my mouth. "As if your sorcerer's play could hurt me."

"I'll have you know I designed a very complex spell," I said indignantly.

"A terrible one that killed you when you were forced to break it," she said. "You're lucky my original Fae curse won out over the ravages of your dark human magic. I suppose a curse woven with love will always be stronger."

I sobered, turning my face away from Andralia. "My magic has indeed ravaged the land. Did you know that the welaways who roam this wood are the offspring of foul enchantments? The women who came here—they all turned into wolf-demons."

Andralia slid off me and lay at my side, stroking my chest. "I've seen similar things happen wherever powerful human sorcerers live and operate. The energy for their spellwork has to come from somewhere. Most of them are too greedy to use only their personal energy reserves—instead they siphon it little by little from the people and animals around them. Regular animals and humans, those without magic, cannot restore their own energy, and after a while, if too much energy is taken from them, they are corrupted and changed by the process. They become prey to the darkness, and transform into demons."

Horror coiled in my gut. "What are you saying? That I was siphoning the women's energy through the roses?"

Andralia frowned. "You didn't know it?"

"One of my instructors taught me to siphon," I said. "But I didn't realize the connection between the girls and the roses would steal their energy—oh gods. And I spent so much magic while they were with me, trying to please them, to win them..."

Nausea roiled in my belly as I thought of all the times I had sucked bits of energy from people in the kingdom. I'd done it ever since I was very young. Had my instructor siphoned energy from my subjects too? Was that where the first welaways in our kingdom had come from?

That particular instructor had left our kingdom after a couple of years, claiming I'd grown beyond what he could teach me. I'd never seen him again.

Perhaps he'd left before the instances of welaway transformation grew too numerous. He fled before suspicion could latch onto him.

But I'd never heard any other instructor of mine mention siphoning, or a magical connection to welaways. Perhaps only the Fae held the knowledge of the demons' true origins. Or perhaps the price of such corrosive magic was a closely guarded secret among the conclaves of human sorcerers.

It did not matter now. All that mattered was my part in the travesty, my guilt. Why should I have my human form again, when I'd inadvertently robbed so many people of theirs?

My gut convulsed. It was strange, feeling the raw acid of nausea so soon after the throes of pleasure—but I couldn't stop the reaction. I lurched to my feet and staggered clumsily on my newly human legs, over to the ragged hole in the ground where I'd torn up the rosebush. I vomited into the gaping aperture.

Andralia came up behind me, wrapping a silken robe around my body. She must have conjured it herself.

"The Fae have natural magic, and deep wells of energy," she said. "For humans, magic comes at a harsher price."

"Can it be undone?" I asked hoarsely. "Can I restore them? The ones who still roam the forests?"

"To do so would require vast amounts of magic—more than you or I could provide," she said. "There are energy sources in Faerie that might be able to accomplish it. But it would take time to research and locate them, and most of those treasures are hidden and

heavily guarded by their owners." Her fingers massaged my spine through the silky fabric.

When I turned to her, she was frowning curiously, and her eyes were lit with the blended glow of surprise and pleasure. "You really have changed, haven't you?" she said.

"Not enough yet, and too recently for me to be sure of it," I said dryly. "But I must begin to make reparation for all I have done. Whatever the cost, I must restore the demons I made to their natural form."

"You'll come with me to Faerie," she said, tracing my collarbone with her sharp nails. "Now that I have no cursed toys to obsess over, I need a new project. We will do this together."

Joy sparked in my heart. "You mean it?"

"I never say things I don't mean," she replied. "It will be terribly dangerous, and we'll have to piss off many of the High Fae and the Elder Malefics. We'll probably die." She said it gleefully, with a sharp smile that made her so ruthlessly beautiful my breath caught.

"Sounds perfect," I said. "I'll need to gather a few things, and say goodbye to my brother—oh gods—my brother. Caswell—he's stuck in beast form now." I struck my forehead, furious with myself for not thinking of it. I'd been incredibly selfish yet again. I'd taken pleasure with Andralia while my beastly brother slunk away to mourn the eternal loss of his humanity.

"There's still hope for him," said Andralia, with a small smile.

"What do you mean?" I stared at her. "You said when one of us found love, the other would be doomed to eternity as a beast."

"That isn't exactly how I worded it," she said. "I said the one who found love first would regain human form, along with all your subjects and servants. And I said that the other brother would remain a beast. But I didn't say it would be forever. When Caswell finds love, he will also be freed."

"Thank the gods," I gasped.

"No," said Andralia, her Fae eyes flashing. "Thank me."

I sank to my knees before her and kissed her hand. "Wicked divine, your compassion astounds me."

When I looked up, she was blushing, trying to hide a smile. "I may be cruel, but I'm not merciless."

"We must tell Caswell there's hope," I said, rising.

"We can't," she replied. "The love must be spontaneous, genuine, and true, and it will happen faster if he doesn't expect it or push for it. He cares for Lyrical, does he not?"

"He does, and I'm fairly sure she's beginning to love him as well."

"Then he will soon be free, without our interference. Let's say our goodbyes—I need to be in Faerie again tonight, for the Imbolc celebrations."

Still holding Andralia's hand, I led her through the shattered courtyard and into the gardens, toward the castle.

"One more question," I said as we walked. "Do you know what happened to my parents?"

"Ah, that." She withdrew her hand from mine and looked away from me. "Anyone associated with the castle forgot about it entirely as soon as the curse took effect. Your parents didn't remember you, or their role as monarchs. They never returned here, but I heard they made a pleasant life for themselves in a coastal town and lived out their days happily there. As for the kingdom, it fell into disarray, and pieces of it were assimilated into neighboring lands."

I shot her a glance, awed by the extent of her power. To achieve such a wide-ranging curse, with such far-reaching effects on so many memories—

"You're one of the most powerful Fae in existence, aren't you?" I asked.

"I'm the daughter of the reigning King of Faerie." Her words carried a sour twist. "Heir to a throne I don't want, and to magic that tends to take on a life of its own whenever I use too much of it."

"Ah." I recaptured her hand again. "So the almighty Fae Princess isn't entirely in control of her powers. She has *weaknesses*."

Her eyes snapped to mine. "Not *weaknesses*, exactly. But perhaps I'm not as perfect as you thought."

"I never thought you were perfect." I tucked my fingers between hers and lifted our hands so I could kiss her knuckles. "But your flaws only make you more enticing."



I followed Caswell through the gardens, pausing with him whenever he stopped to greet a newly restored human. It shocked me how many gardening implements, statues, and fountains had actually been *people*—people who now wandered about, naked and confused and joyful, all of them flocking toward the castle. I saw a number of horses trotting around as well.

"I don't remember there being horses here," I muttered aside to Caswell.

"Every mount in the stables was affected by the curse too," he said. "A few became statues, and others were transformed into shovels, pitchforks, or saddles." He pointed to a massive chestnut gelding with a proud head and rippling mane. "That horse was my favorite. His name is Bellburn."

"You should call to him," I urged.

Caswell shook his shaggy head, sorrow coloring his tone. "He wouldn't recognize me now."

Greeting the castle's denizens and answering their questions slowed our progress, so by the time we reached the front doors of the castle, Andralia and Everston were approaching as well. They both began conjuring clothes for the humans, and once that was done, there were hugs and tears and shouts of gladness.

Caswell avoided his brother and the Faerie, choosing instead to go below into the dungeon and free those trapped there.

"What if the prisoners are dangerous?" I asked him.

"They have served a long enough sentence," he said gruffly. "I can only hope it has changed their nature. Either way, they deserve a

chance at a new life."

When everyone in the gardens and the castle had been clothed, they all gathered in the dusty hall that had once been the throne room, and Everston spoke to them.

Many of them already knew how and why they'd been cursed, for though they couldn't speak in their object forms, they could listen, and they'd picked up parts of the story from their beastly masters. But Everston told the whole saga from beginning to end, severely condemning himself for most of it.

When Everston mentioned that Andralia was the Fae who had cursed them, rumbles of anger rippled through the crowd.

"You punished all of us for what the princes did," someone called.

"Cruel Fae! Go back to your own realm!" shouted another.

The cries increased in volume and rage. From my spot in the back corner of the room, I couldn't see Andralia's expression clearly, but I didn't think shouting at her and antagonizing her was the best move. Didn't these fools realize what she could do to them? Best not to yell at the Fae Princess who cursed you for a hundred years.

Everston stepped forward, lifting his hands to quiet the people. "Your anger is understandable," he said. "But you should remember that while Andralia created the curse, she was also the one to break it."

A grudging murmur of assent slithered through the assembly.

"I understand that her presence here might be unacceptable to some of you," Everston continued. "However, I don't intend to be separated from her again. And that is why Andralia and I will be leaving immediately, and returning to Faerie. I'm not fit to be your prince. And I must devote myself to reversing the destruction I've caused."

He kept talking, explaining something about magical energy, siphons, and Fae relics—but all I could think about was Caswell and how he might be reacting to the announcement.

He stood near me, deep in the shadowed corner of the great hall, with his arms crossed over his chest. Everyone he'd encountered had seemed happy to see him—apparently he'd treated them all well while in his beast form. But mingled with their gladness was pity—

sadness that he was still a beast, the last one stuck in the throes of the curse.

Usually I could read Caswell's face, despite the bullish features—but he wore a stolid, closed expression—impassive and apathetic. I suspected that it was a mask—that underneath he was hurting too deeply for words. Rejoicing for his brother, yet mourning for himself.

I side-stepped closer to him, but before I could touch his arm he moved away. He didn't look at me, not even when Everston finished his speech and began his farewell tour among the people.

"They'll be coming this way soon," I murmured to Caswell. "What are you going to say to him?"

"That he's a fool for loving that Fae bitch," muttered Caswell. "Horrific as our sins were, she had no right to curse the innocent people who lived and worked here."

"Oh. Um, maybe not the very best thing you could say."

He rumbled low in his chest.

Andralia and Everston kept working their way through the crowd until they stood before us.

"Brother," said Everston.

Ignoring him, Caswell sank clumsily to his knees and bowed before Andralia.

"I do not ask for reprieve from the curse," he said. "I do not deserve it. I beg your forgiveness for my wickedness, for the pain I caused you."

Andralia stooped, gripped the fur of his cheek, and made him look up. "You were sweet and gentle with me, and gave me great pleasure," she said. "Wicked you may have been, but it was born of foolishness, not cruelty. You have suffered for it, and will suffer, so yes, I forgive you."

She rose, and so did Caswell, heavily, still weighted by the curse.

Everston clapped his human hand against Caswell's shoulder. "Do not give up hope. We will find a way to restore you."

I couldn't help staring at Everston. So this was what the brothers looked like. As Everston's twin, Caswell must have the same strong, masculine face, handsome and regal.

"Lyrical." Everston turned to me, his purple eyes shining with affection and gratitude. "I am grateful to you."

"Why? I did nothing."

"You did everything." He reached out, enfolding me in a hug that smelled of warmth and sunshine. "You changed me. And because of that change, I was ready to atone, to sacrifice myself. If I hadn't, I doubt Andralia would have ever admitted her love for me."

The Fae Princess gave him a baleful look and nipped the lobe of his ear affectionately. I didn't know what to think of her—she was like a storm—wild, impetuous, and unpredictable.

When she reached toward me, I reared back instinctively, but she only took my chin in her hand and examined my face. "You interest me," she said. "You have no Fae blood that I can sense, yet you have the ability to shatter barrier magic. A rare gift. Tell me, did one of your parents have powers?"

"Not my father," I said. "And my mother died when I was young."

"We may never know the source of your ability," she said. "But if I have time, once Everston's business is dealt with, you and I can look into it." She smiled, and even with her sharp Fae canines, there was camaraderie in that smile, a hint of warmth, of sisterhood. Maybe, just maybe, she and I could be friends someday.

"I'm leaving the people in your capable hands, brother," Everston said.

"Right," Caswell answered. "You're prancing off to Faerie in your new perfect body, leaving my beastly ass here to rule over a crowd of castle staff who have no homes, no possessions, and no food. If any of them had family beyond these walls, they're long dead. I cannot hire or support any of them, and they'll pick the gardens clean of food in a day. Our kingdom is *gone*, Everston. There's nothing to rule anymore."

"Everston and I will conjure a feast before we leave," said Andralia.

"And I suspect you already have a plan for the future," said Everston, eyes locked on his brother's face. "You've already crafted plans for how we should proceed if the curse was ever broken. Admit it." Caswell grunted, hooves shuffling and scraping against the marble floor. "Perhaps I have."

"Well?" Everston raised his eyebrows.

"I thought we might give each of these people a portion of the castle treasures," Caswell confessed. "I have a general estimate of what's in the treasury, and a rough guess of how many people were trapped by the curse—if we divide the wealth among them, they should have enough to begin new lives."

Everston grinned. "Always with the plans and the calculations. That's an excellent idea, and I thoroughly approve. Let's talk details before I leave."

He drew Caswell aside, and Andralia stalked away to begin conjuring the feast. Once the crowd realized what she was up to, they forgot their anger. None of them had been able to consume or taste food in a century, and they could barely hold themselves back until she was done creating the meal.

As for me, I sneaked a portion for myself and carried my plate out into the gardens. They felt even emptier now, more desolate despite the breaking of the curse.

I found myself following the path to Caswell's sagging cottage at the edge of the grounds. I sat cross-legged on the moss where I'd tended to him after his fight with the welaway, and I ate my fill of the tender savory meats, buttered potatoes, and the other delights Andralia had conjured. Like the food Everston made, it all tasted wonderful and it satisfied my stomach completely.

But my heart was unsettled, uncertain. My emotions had been crashing and soaring all morning. As glad as I was that the curse had been broken, I couldn't help mourning the loss of the life I'd begun to enjoy—quiet days of working beside Caswell in the gardens, lunches and dinners in the open air, talking of plants and books and history.

He'd spoken of sending everyone away with some funds for a new life. Did that plan include me? I wasn't one of his former subjects—I was just a runaway slave girl who'd wandered into his home and stayed because she couldn't leave.

If I hung around, he might think I was waiting for my share of the treasure. I should go now, so he wouldn't think me greedy and grasping.

But without money, how would I survive? Perhaps I should swallow my pride, take the handout, and leave with the others.

And then what would happen to Caswell? Would he remain here alone?

I couldn't stand the thought of him living out his days here by himself, trapped in beast form. Everston had said something about finding a way to free him—and since Everston seemed intent on righting the wrongs he'd done, I had to believe he was sincere. If there was a way to fix Caswell, he'd find it. But when? How long would Caswell have to suffer through life as a beast? Would he die before Everston could find a magical solution to the curse?

I set my plate on the moss and tucked my knees up to my chest, resting my chin on them.

It was bitterly unfair that even my love couldn't save Caswell now.

A brisk cold wind rushed over my uncovered arms, making me shiver despite the noon sunshine. Now that the curse was over, the bone-chilling cold from the forest would begin to creep past the walls, into the castle grounds. Caswell's plants would succumb, shriveling under the icy thumb of winter.

I could not bear to think of him here alone. But I wasn't sure he would want me to stay. We'd had a single, beautiful night of passion, but I'd enjoyed a similar interlude with Everston. Sex didn't mean Caswell would really want me around forever. It didn't mean he loved me

I stayed in the mossy space for a long time before I finally worked up the nerve to return to the castle. Instead of going through the kitchen door, I circled around to the front, where I could hear noise and voices.

Part of the hedge maze had been cleared, probably by Fae magic, and a long lane now cut through it, all the way from the castle steps to the main gate in the outer wall, beyond the edge of my sight.

Along that new lane, a row of carriages were lined up. People hustled back and forth, carrying armfuls of blankets, dishes, and jewelry. It looked as if they were looting the place, though I knew Caswell and Everston had condoned it. Still, the sight of all the princes' possessions being toted away sent a twist of panic through my chest—and the goods weren't even mine.

Whether the carriages had been stored somewhere and refurbished by magic, or whether Andralia had conjured them, I didn't know, and I was too nervous to ask. Instead I slipped into the castle and wandered the halls until I found a bedroom that had been thoroughly ransacked. A few pieces of clothing were left, including a gown I thought might fit me. I needed something to replace my smudged, filthy dress.

With the fresh clothes in hand, I went down to the kitchen, with some vague idea of heating bathwater for myself. If I was to be kicked out with everyone else, I wanted to be clean first. It wouldn't do to arrive in a new village looking like a filthy street urchin.

Andralia stood in the kitchen, swirling wine in a glass and staring out the open door into the gardens. She glanced at me when I entered and gave me a short nod.

"The princes are arming some of the guards, to defend the carriages as they pass through the wood," she said. "And they'll have me as a protector as well. Such a lot of bother, curse-breaking. If I'd known how much trouble it would be to sort everyone out again afterward, I'd never have cast the damn thing in the first place."

She laughed, but in the musical sound I detected a note of true regret.

"They'll get it all figured out." It was a vague, obvious reassurance, but Andralia seemed to appreciate it. She poured me a glass of the red wine, and I accepted it, because to refuse might have offended her.

I couldn't believe I was standing near the vengeful curse-caster, sipping wine. For one thing, she was so beautiful I could hardly believe it.

For another, I still wasn't sure how I felt about her. Her hurt and anger I understood, but her methods of revenge had been so very cruel.

"You have good taste in clothes." Andralia nodded at the gown on my arm.

"Thank you." I flushed, because an actual Faerie Princess complimenting my clothing choices was possibly the loveliest thing that had ever happened to me. "Actually, I was hoping for a bath

before I change. This place is too old for plumbing, and I'm not sure how to arrange for the hot water."

"You poor mortals," Andralia exclaimed, setting down her glass. "So helpless. So enslaved to your technology. Come with me, and we'll see to your bath."

Andralia found me a bathing room and filled the tub with steaming water in half a second. "Don't be long," she said. "The convoy will be leaving soon."

I bathed and washed my hair quickly. Refreshed and renewed, clothed in the yellow gown I'd chosen, I descended to the first floor again.

The people of the castle were hopping into carriages, while those who had once been guards sat on the driver's seats and on the carriage roofs, clad in armor and carrying weapons to fend off any welaways that might attack.

Andralia and Everston stood on the broad stone steps with Caswell. "The lane to the main road will be overgrown," Andralia was saying. "Everston and I will ride ahead to clear it."

"I'm nearly at the limit of my energy, darling," Everston replied. "And I'm determined not to surpass it, so I may have to leave that job to you."

"I'll do it," she said, lowering her eyelashes, "only if you pay me back somehow, later."

As they kissed, my eyes met Caswell's. I pulled a wry face, and he made a chuffing sound, like a snorted laugh. I knew, without being told, that he thought as I did about the brutal passion between Andralia and Everston. Their love was real, no doubt of that—real enough to break the curse—but it was a torturous, poisonous fire that might end up consuming them both.

If that was love, I'd certainly never felt it.

But maybe there was more than one kind of true love.

Pulling away from each other, Andralia and Everston mounted the horses waiting nearby.

"Enjoy the castle, you two," said Andralia, with a wink.

"We'll visit soon," added Everston.

But I knew, as Caswell did, that he wouldn't be back anytime soon. There was a manic, eager light in Everston's eyes—the urgency of a man who'd been bound to one building for a hundred years. He wanted to leave so badly he could hardly get away fast enough. I didn't blame him.

Caswell lifted a paw. "Go," he said. "Take all the time you need."

Everston bit his lip, a flash of pain and regret crossing his face. Then he nodded to his brother and lifted the reins, urging his horse forward.

"It feels amazing to ride again," he called back, exuberant. And then he was off, charging ahead to catch up with Andralia and lead the caravan.

Caswell leaned down and picked up a small, ornately embellished trunk in his paws. "You need to hurry. You can catch the last carriage." He shoved the trunk toward me, and I accepted it automatically.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Your share." He stared ahead at the row of carriages. The first two had begun to move, with a rattle of wheels and a cacophony of cheering voices. "You need to leave. Begin a new life."

"But—what if I want to stay here?"

"That's foolish," he growled. "Everston and Andralia said you should stay here, and I pretended to agree with them at first—but I've decided I can't allow it. You're leaving. Right now. Go."

My fingers tightened around the handles of the trunk. "What about you?"

"I will enjoy full access to the castle until Everston returns to break my curse."

"But you'll have no one to conjure food for you. You won't have anything to eat."

"I intend to harvest what I can from the gardens before the frost comes in and kills it all," he said. "And I can hunt during the winter. Now go, before they leave you behind. I have work to do."

"This is stupid." My throat tightened, and my eyes stung. "I'm not leaving you. Come with us."

Even as I spoke, I knew it was the wrong thing to say.

Caswell's beastly face darkened. "Come with you?" he snarled. "In what town will I be welcomed and accepted? Is there a place I can go where the villagers will not immediately drive me out, or try to kill me? You're a fool if you think I can live anywhere else in this form."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Do you know what will happen if you stay?" he growled, clasping his great wolfish paw around my throat. "I *will* grow hungry this winter. And I'll begin to eye your delicate flesh, and I'll crave a taste. I will devour you whole, Songbird. You will fill my belly, and I will lick your blood from my claws."

His sharp teeth were a breath from my face, bared beneath his curled lips. His voice was thunderous, terrifying, as he shoved me away, toward the last of the carriages. "Go!" he roared. "Get out. Run, little castaway, and do not return. I never want to see your face again."

Angry and scared, with tears blurring my vision, I left him there and ran for the carriage. I barely got my skirts and the trunk inside before it began to roll away, leaving the cursed castle and its lone denizen behind.

I sat frozen in my seat, hardly believing what I had done—the choice I'd made.

The carriage jostled along the lane through the gardens, and I kept thinking I could still leap out and run back to him. I could still change my mind.

And then we passed through the gate, into the forest. Frost immediately crawled across the windows, turning them feathery and white.

As we followed the caravan through the wood, I thought I heard a distant roar of anguish.



After Everston and the others left, after I had roared my agony to the sky and worn myself out galloping through the maze, I wandered disconsolate into the empty castle and began to explore my new prison.

I discovered that Andralia had filled the pantry with Fae food. I had no idea how long it would last in the human world—the food Everston conjured disappeared after a day or so if it wasn't eaten. But it was kind of her to think of my welfare, and the gesture made me think slightly better of her. Very slightly.

For the next week I did not allow myself to worry about anything but the harvest.

I mentally calculated how long I could make it last, how much food I would need to sustain my life every day. I'd tried to starve myself once, while the curse was in effect—but I'd never found out if it would have worked. The hunger had grown too strong for me to resist, and I'd yielded to the need to eat.

When the curse on the castle had been dispelled, I'd lost my healing abilities. Bruises and cuts mended much more slowly, and I had to move more cautiously through my tasks, remembering that I was vulnerable now. Not that I much cared if I got hurt, or died.

Lyrical was gone.

Sweet, selfless girl that she was, she would have stayed with me. She would have grown pale and sad and haunted, wandering the halls like a wraith until the food ran out. Though I'd threatened her with the idea, I'd never have eaten her. I'd have killed myself first. Unless the dark thing in my soul, the feral magic holding me to beast form, had managed to surge out and overcome my conscious will.

Then I might have forgotten that Lyrical was more than winsome flesh and fragile bones, that she was my world, my treasure, my joy.

I might have forgotten that, and committed the unthinkable.

It was better this way.

She was beyond my reach. Safe. Far away, beginning again in a new place, maybe in a city teeming with life and opportunities.

Once I had cleared the garden of all the produce I could salvage and stored it safely in the cellars, I worked on preserving the more perishable fruits of my labor. And when I wasn't doing that, I was cutting down trees in the forest beyond the wall, hauling them back to the castle one at a time and chopping them up for firewood. I closed off most of the castle, making the kitchen my living quarters so I would only need to heat one room.

Our former subjects had taken as many of the blankets as they could carry, but I found a few that had been left behind, along with mattresses and pillows. At one end of the kitchen I made myself a bed far more comfortable than my nest of pelts had ever been.

I kept myself occupied with work, and I focused my mind on each task, finding new ways to count and measure what I was doing. I counted the number of strokes of the ax it took to fell a tree, and then I counted the rings of each tree I cut down. I tried to make each log of firewood a uniform size and shape. In my mind I estimated how much burn time I might get from each piece.

Eight days after the curse broke, I was chopping a tree outside the front gates, near the lane leading through the forest. With my mind fully engaged in counting and calculations, I was too deep in my work to hear the strangers approaching until they were nearly upon me.

When my ears caught the voices, I ducked into a thicket and waited, trying to quiet my huffing breaths. My body tensed with apprehension.

A dozen men tramped past my hiding place, following the road through the forest. They wore black leather, with shackles, whips, and chains dangling from their belts and their packs. Slavers, by the look of them.

"Are you sure it's this way?" asked one man.

"That's what Brick said," answered another. "He said a whole troop of folks came out of the forest, carrying all kinds of treasure. Said he followed the road they came from all the way to a castle, but then some creature spooked him, and he took off."

"Creature?" asked the first man. "A welaway?"

"Most likely."

"Which is why we came heavily armed," interrupted a third man. "Now quiet, all of you. I see something up ahead, maybe a wall."

I couldn't allow this. These brigands couldn't run through my home unchecked, stealing my stores and ruining what was left of my family's possessions. My parents were long dead—according to Andralia, they'd forgotten all about us once the curse took effect—but I still felt protective of this place. The portraits on the walls, the books in the library—those hadn't been touched when everyone left. Those were still mine to preserve and protect.

Once the men had passed, I loped through the forest, circling around to a side gate. Perhaps I should have locked all the gates after Everston and the others departed, but I hadn't, because deep in my heart quivered the tiniest hope that a certain golden-haired girl might return one day. And I wanted her to know she was welcome.

I ducked through the side gate and galloped through the maze, aiming for the lane Everston and Andralia had cut from the front gate. The men would be walking along it, heading for the castle doors, eager to plunder its riches. I could intercept them and try to talk them out of it, or I could snatch them one by one, drag them into the maze, and end them.

I suspected talking wouldn't work with this group. They were already on alert for the presence of a welaway, and they'd likely shoot me full of crossbow bolts before I had a chance to open my muzzle. The better plan would be to catch and kill them one at a time.

But I hadn't counted on the interference of my feral self. As I closed in on the group, I caught their scent—meaty and male, salty and savory.

I hadn't had meat in so long. Everston hadn't been around to conjure any for me, and I hadn't taken the time to hunt.

My lips hitched up, curling back over my teeth. My rational voice blurred to a panicked murmur at the back of my mind while the beast inside me roared forth, slavering and hungry.

A snarl ripped from my throat, and I bolted down the maze corridor, leaped onto one of the men, and tore out his throat.

The sensation of my fangs sinking into warm flesh, being bathed in hot blood—it was a bliss beyond anything I'd imagined. The screaming joy of the kill took over my body and brain, and I sprang onto the next man, chewing deep into his thigh.

With my mouth full of that man, I rammed my horned head straight into the stomach of another.

Then pain licked my shoulder, and more pain flared through my chest. Crossbow bolts whizzed through the air, striking my paw, my other shoulder, my stomach. I bellowed in rage and agony, dragging down a fourth man before the burning anguish sucked me down, weakening my limbs. Yelling and cursing, the men shot me three more times before running off toward the castle.

I must have passed out, because I resurfaced only to glimpse them trudging past me again, carrying bulging packs.

"Not much left worth taking," one of them grumbled, and he gave me a swift kick to the head as he passed.

Perhaps they thought I was already dead. I wanted to be. I hated myself for the frenzy that had stolen my control. Even now I could feel the blood of the men I'd killed, caked between the pads of my paws. I felt shreds of them between my fangs. I could smell their dead bodies, leaking urine and shit, lying not far from me.

It was fitting that I die here with them—a monster among monsters.

But my massive, brutish body refused to give in. My heart kept pumping relentlessly, and my lungs kept heaving breaths in and out, even when the men were long gone and the sky was darkening overhead. The cold seeped into my bones, spiking my pain to greater agony. My whole body was wracked with shivers.

I prayed to the gods and to the Fae, begging for the end to come. But a restless panic inside me wouldn't still, wouldn't quiet down and yield. I craved knowledge of Lyrical's welfare. Had she found somewhere safe to live? Did she have pleasant work she enjoyed?

Was she making friends, staying away from men who might use and abuse her? How could I leave the world without knowing she was all right?

Grunting with excruciating effort, I tried to rise—tried to drag myself along the road toward the castle. Maybe I could pull the bolts out and heal in the slow, regular way, and then go after Lyrical. I could shroud myself in a cloak and watch her from a distance, just to be sure she was all right. But how would I know which town she'd settled in? And how—

I collapsed on the dirt, my head spinning from the loss of blood. My limbs were growing heavy and numb—I was freezing slowly.

Would I succumb to my wounds or to the cold first?

"Cast your bets, gentlemen," I wheezed, with a hoarse chuckle. I was used to animated objects being nearby to hear me.

But there was no one now. I was truly alone.

My mind dimmed and darkened. The end was coming at last.

The rhythm of hoofbeats and the rattle of wheels snapped me out of my stupor, and I groaned at the intrusion.

A voice called out sharply, and the hoofbeats stopped.

A moment later, a sweet-smelling apparition crouched by my head. Gloved fingers found my muzzle, turning my face upward.

"Oh gods, Caswell."

Nothing had ever sounded so beautiful as Lyrical's pained voice. But she was a dream of course. A last vision vomited out by my fading brain.

"No, no, this can't be happening." Lyrical patted my broad furred cheek sharply. "Caswell, stay awake. Please—oh fuck—" and she began to swear, like she had the first day I met her.

Perhaps she was real after all.

And if she was, that meant—

She had come back.

My Songbird had come back to me.

I tried to smile. My muzzle could manage a sort of smile, not a very good one. A hum of satisfied peace rolled through my torso.

"You smell good," I murmured. "You smell healthy, and rich."

"You're ridiculous," she half-sobbed. "I've been busy buying supplies, so I could return here and winter with you—and you've already gone and gotten yourself *murdered!* What is *wrong* with you?"

"Mmm," was all I could manage.

"Don't do that." She pressed her forehead to my muzzle and one small hand to my chest. "Don't make that sound—I love it so much—I love *you* so much—how dare you make me love you and then die like this, you inconsiderate beast—it isn't *fair*—" and she burst into violent sobs.

But my body was vibrating, sizzling, quaking. A light like starfire exploded from my center, tossing Lyrical backward, slicing its beams through the night.

The dark bestial magic slithered out of me, washed away in the light. The bloodlust, the craving for flesh, the hunter's instinct—all of it dissipated, and a wild, shining freedom bathed my soul. I couldn't see or hear, or think—I could only *feel* as my body shifted and altered, fitting itself into a new form. I wasn't healing, exactly—I was being remade.

Like Everston, I was being created anew.

When all of me had settled into place, I landed hard on the dirt, amid my own half-dried blood. I was whole—no more wounds. And I didn't have giant clomping hooves, or wolf's paws, or a bull's head.

I had smooth flesh, muscular and healthy. Long limbs, well-formed—although honestly, any human limbs would have been enough for me after a century of being a beast.

No more fur—only hair in the places where it should be—on my head, under my arms, lightly sprinkled across my chest, and between my legs, where—I reached down, and thank the gods—I had my human dick again. Mine has always been larger and thicker than Everston's, even in human form.

"What. The fuck," said Lyrical.

I sat up, staring at my arms and my beautiful, beautiful hands. "Maybe we misunderstood the curse."

Gods, was that my voice? Still deep, but smoother, less gravelly. I wanted to hear it again. "Apparently even if Everston was freed first, love could set me free, too."

"Why didn't Andralia tell us?" Lyrical was shaking, but when I reached for her, she shrank away.

"I think she tried to," I said. "She and Everston were very insistent that you stay with me in the castle. But I thought I was doing the right thing, sending you away..." My voice trailed off as I flexed my fingers, moved my toes. Every damaged part of me had been remade—not a wound or a scratch marred my body. But I was beginning to feel the cold again, seeping quickly into my naked flesh.

"We need to get to the castle," I said. "Before I freeze."

"Oh yes. Of course, yes. Come, get into the carriage. There should be just enough room for you among the bundles."

"Wait, did you drive this carriage through the woods yourself? Alone?"

"Of course not. I hired an armed escort," she said. "They rode with me until the castle gate, and then I made them turn back. I barred the gates behind me—I hope that was all right. Judging by this—" she nodded to the dead ruffians—" it looks like locking the gate was a good idea."

"They wanted to loot the castle," I said. "They got away with a few bags of items. And they might come back in a day or two, with wagons or carts so they can carry off the finer pieces of furniture." I could hardly speak, I was shivering so hard.

"Tomorrow you can ride this horse and secure all the other gates," Lyrical said. "For now, get in the carriage, you big fool. I'm not losing you again."

Her lips trembled, and two bright spots of red shone in her cheeks, highlighted by the lantern hanging from the front of the carriage. Without another word to me, she pressed a boot on the step and hauled herself onto the driver's seat, lifting the reins of the horse. The creature perked up, mouthing the bit.

A startled realization swept through me. The horse was Bellburn, my favorite steed from long ago. He'd been taken, along with all the other castle horses, to pull the carriages of our former subjects.

Lyrical must have claimed him once they reached the city, and now she'd brought him back to me.

I stepped to his head, reaching out a hand, and he nosed into my palm, a familiar greeting.

I looked up at Lyrical with tear-blurred eyes. Through a smile she said, "Go on, get in."

Shivering, I pulled open the carriage door and wedged myself inside, between boxes and trunks. Lyrical had exchanged the jewels I'd given her for a quantity of preserved food, warm clothing, and various other supplies—enough to last two people an entire winter.

She came back for me.

She loved me.

The assurance of her love kept me warm until we reached the front steps of the castle. I climbed out of the carriage, swaying on my new legs—or my old legs, I suppose. My human legs, remade by magic. Had they always been this magnificent?

Lyrical directed me to one of the trunks, in which lay an enormous greatcoat, one that probably would have fit me even as a beast. Tall and broad though I was in human form, the coat still had a generous amount of room

Lyrical cocked her head, grimacing. "I'm sorry it's so huge. I got the largest one they had, because—"

"You expected me to be a beast forever," I said. "And still you came back to me."

She flushed and looked down at the floor. "I would love you in any form. And fuck you in any form, too."

"Hmm," I rumbled appreciatively, pulling her close.

Her gaze flashed up to mine, surprised and delighted. "You sound the same. Do it again." She placed one palm on my chest.

"Mmm," I rumbled, and her grin widened.

"Help me bring the things in, quickly," she said. "I'm sorry I don't have boots for you! I didn't expect you to need them."

"I can manage until we get everything inside," I said. "But tomorrow I should find some kind of footwear. There may still be some pairs of my boots in my old rooms." We both worked in a kind of daze, doing what needed to be done, postponing our full wonder and shock at what had happened. I adjusted quickly to my legs—I'd been born with them, after all, and even after a hundred years, they were my natural state. I wanted to leap, and run, and take a flight of stairs two at a time. I wanted to ride a horse again. I couldn't remember ever feeling this joyful.

As we carried trunks and crates into the castle, Lyrical kept staring at me sidelong, with a wondering smile hovering over her lips.

"You should put Bellburn in the stable," I told her at last. "I'll finish up here."

I toted the last of the supplies into my kitchen hideaway while Lyrical got Bellburn settled. When she returned, I hauled the castle doors shut and barred them, then picked up the last trunk and carried it to the kitchen.

We'd lit a fire, and it was beginning to warm the place. Thankfully ruffians hadn't disturbed much; they'd been after valuables, not vegetables, and most of the silver had already been given away to my former servants and subjects.

I set down the trunk and straightened, running a hand over the back of my neck. My fingers slid through my hair—my own hair, soft and silken compared to the coarse, shaggy fur I'd worn for so long.

Lyrical was all the way across the room, half-shrouded in shadows, with the firelight dancing over her features. She watched me, still with that same ghost of a smile.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Your face," she whispered. "Especially your smile. You've always been so gruff—I guess I never really imagined you smiling."

I grinned wider. "Everston was always the smiley one. But I have more than enough cause to smile tonight."

She nodded, still eyeing me. "You look very good in that coat."

She drifted closer to me, cautiously, like a doe prancing nearer to a salt-lick, or a bird hopping nervously closer to a pile of seeds.

Every bit of my body wanted her touch. I ached to slide my hands over the shape of her. A hundred years since I'd touched a woman with anything but paws—a hundred years since I'd had my human cock.

A soft growl built in my chest, a leftover habit from my beastly self. My blood pumped hot through my veins, and the closer she crept, the stronger my arousal grew, until it was more pain than pleasure.

Yet I waited, motionless, letting her acclimate to the new height and shape of me.



Caswell's human form was stunning. He was the kind of beautiful that I'd seen only a few times in real life—usually some stranger riding through town, whose regal profile and strong bearing caught my eye. I'd never been this close to a man so handsome and wellformed.

The coat looked magnificent on him, but my fingers twitched with the urge to take it off. I'd seen his naked form when he first changed, but I'd been too stunned to appreciate it properly.

Of course Caswell wouldn't want me to strip him—he'd only just transformed. He'd need some time to adjust to his body before—before we—

"Are you going to stare, Songbird," he said through clenched teeth. "Or are you going to kiss me?"

I stepped swiftly forward and rose on tiptoe, touching my mouth to his.

His lips weren't the loose, wide, velvety ones he'd had as a beast. They were full, smooth, and hot.

The first kiss was a brush of rose petals, delicate and tentative.

Our second kiss was pressure and passion awakening.

Our third was a quick merging of mouths, over and over, and then a long deep press, and the liquid quiver of his tongue against my lips. I opened my mouth, and our tongues slid together.

Immediately my core flared with heat and tingling desire, and I swayed into Caswell, my hips bumping against the majestic coat.

"Can you—can you take the coat off?" I whispered.

"Gods, yes," he groaned. "Can you take the dress off?"

He'd seen me naked before, I reminded myself. We'd been naked together after the icy rainstorm—fucked each other, too.

But he'd been a beast then, and we'd been cocooned in his familiar cabin.

Now we stood in the enormous kitchen of the castle, with its shadowed tables and cupboards stretching into the cavernous dark. We were half-encircled by the crates of provisions I had brought, and they formed a sort of wall between us and the darkness. The tiny fire we'd made in the gigantic fireplace sparked and popped quietly, bathing us in light and heat.

"I need to get something," Caswell said, shifting away from me.

He went into the dark part of the kitchen and returned, dragging a mattress. He went back again for an armful of blankets and pillows, which he arranged at the edge of the firelight.

While he was thus occupied, I pulled off my dress, and I unlaced my corset. I stepped out of my petticoats and drawers, and when Caswell turned back around, I stood warm and bare and trembling in the golden glow.

His pupils dilated, and he swore softly. His fingers fumbled over the toggles on the coat.

"Let me," I murmured, and I stepped in, undoing them one by one. The heavy fabric slid off him, and I inhaled sharply at the sight of his body.

I already knew the swells of his chest, the ridges of his stomach. But the long slanted ledges of muscle along his hips, tapering down to the erect shaft between his solid thighs—those were new. The curves of his calves, the thick arches of his feet, his ten toes—they were new as well.

His hands, his beautiful thick fingers, and those pronounced male knuckles—those were new, and I loved them. I wanted those fingertips wandering my body, exploring every curve and crevice.

I sneaked another look at the smooth column between his legs, at the glistening drop on the head of it. My own body reacted, a widening swell of heat, a tender quivering readiness. He wasn't as enormous as he'd been in bull form, but his cock was definitely larger and thicker than the one I'd glimpsed on Everston.

Lucky me.

My gaze moved higher, to his strong neck and crisply carved jaw, his straight nose, and his luminous dark eyes. And that hair—golden-brown waves barely brushing his powerful shoulders.

"How are you so perfect?" I whispered.

A short huff of laughter burst from him, and I smiled, because that sound was dearly familiar. I'd heard it many times while we worked over garden beds together, while I chattered to him and he rewarded me with appreciative rumblings or short laughs. Those sounds were so different from the anguished bellows I'd heard on my first day in the castle—the cries of a lonely, desolate soul.

Frowning slightly at the memory, I placed my palm over his heart. His shaft bobbed in response when I touched him, and I looked up at his face, my frown shifting into a smile.

This was no stranger riding through town—no god to admire bitterly from a distance. This was my dear beast, the darling man I'd come back for

When I'd arrived in the nearest city with the others from the castle, I hadn't been excited about it. I couldn't enjoy the shops, the sights, the sounds, the opportunities. All I could do was pace my room at the inn and think about Caswell. I didn't want to be there in the city, with the noise and the smoke and the stench, with the swarms of careless, cruel people.

I just wanted to be with him.

My beast.

I grazed his waist with my fingertips. "Can I play with the monster now?"

Caswell gripped my arms and pulled me tight against him with a rippling growl. His hand plunged into my hair, hauling my mouth against his.

Our kisses burned, hot and frantic, while I swept my hands over the silky hardness of his new body and nearly wept at my good fortune. This prince, this beautiful man—he loved me. I had broken his curse, and now he was mine.

My thoughts swirled, dizzy with desire. I gave Caswell a shove, and though my effort barely moved his giant body, he understood what I wanted.

Pulling me with him, he crashed backward onto the mattress. Before I could think about the moment of invasion, he was already sliding inside me—I was so sensitive, so slippery. I hitched in a startled, euphoric breath, overcome with the surging power of him, the breath-stealing, satisfying fullness.

"Oh gods," I whimpered. "You feel amazing."

He was shaking his head, his handsome face contorted. "I can't hold back, Songbird, I—"

"Then let go," I urged.

Caswell bucked into me, and I gave a little screech of shock and delight as he struck that place deep in my core again—the now-familiar point of pleasure that radiated ecstasy through my lower stomach. He pushed in again, striking the same spot, and my body tightened, clenching, yearning. His hands clasped my hips as I rose up a little and slid firmly down.

"Shit, Songbird," he gasped.

I lifted and then sank down on him again—and if I was a little clumsy finding the rhythm, he didn't seem to care. He helped me by surging his hips upward, and I tensed, a tiny "oh" escaping my mouth.

"You're so good at finding that place," I breathed.

His eyes lit with satisfaction, and he moved one hand from my hip, using his first finger to touch my clit, right above where we were joined.

Bolts of sheer pleasure issued from that spot as he circled it, jiggled it—and then he gripped me again, lifted me bodily, and turned us both over on the mattress so that I lay beneath him.

He rolled his hips into me, slow and deep at first—and then he began to thrust, firm and steady, sliding his cock through my swollen pussy while I flung my arms above my head and let him fuck me, helpless to the bone-melting bliss flooding my body.

I came when he did. Both of us, together, synchronized in a throbbing heat, caught in the paralyzing rapture of it. I sat up and began to kiss him before it was over, and tears slipped down my cheeks.

Not dead. My sweet beast wasn't bleeding out on the road. I hadn't been too late.

He was here, with me. Coming inside me. I could feel his heat saturating my body, filling me up.

I clasped both arms around his neck and tucked my face against his cheek.

"Are you all right?" he panted, stroking along my shaking arms with his hands, his wonderful hands.

I answered with a soft mew of dissolute delight, and he chuckled.

"That was too fast on my part," he said. "Next time I will try to last longer."

"Do you hear me complaining?" I murmured.

He wrapped both big arms around me and squeezed me tight against the smooth warmth of his skin.

We made love over and over that night, with breaks for wine and food from the stores I'd brought. In fact, we spent most of that winter naked in the firelight, telling each other dark and delicate secrets from our past, touching and tasting each other's sensitive places, both of body and of soul.

We only left our refuge to check the gates, to tend to Bellburn, or to take walks in the fresh, cold air. The thieves never returned—perhaps because Caswell hung pieces of the dead robbers' bodies on every locked gate.

As the weather warmed, we began to explore the chilly depths of the castle and the neglected paths of the garden. Sometimes we loaded my carriage full of books and drove around the countryside, donating the volumes to homes and schools in all the nearby villages. It was summertime, and as long as we traveled during sunny days, the welaways did not threaten us.

Finally, when we'd emptied most of the library, we decided the castle was too enormous and sad for us to remain there alone. So we left a letter in the great hall, in case Andralia and Everston came back looking for us.

We packed the carriage with everything of value that remained, including plenty of books and some jewels from a secret compartment in Caswell's old quarters, and we left the castle behind.

"We'll buy a house," Caswell said, glancing over at me as I sat beside him on the driver's seat of the carriage. "A small one, with a big garden."

"An overgrown garden," I added. "A messy one, with lots of potential."

"Mmm." He rumbled his assent, and I squirmed happily nearer to him, cupping his arm.

But my smile faded as a howl echoed somewhere in the distance. Autumn was creeping through the forest again, loosening the leaves and slipping chilly fingers between the branches. Soon the welaways wouldn't restrict their hunts to the dark night—they would venture out on cloudy cold days as well.

And I wondered, not for the first time, if Andralia and Everston would ever discover a cure for those poor souls. They deserved to regain their humanity, as the princes had.

"The sun is bright today," Caswell reassured me. "And there's only one of them, by the sound of it. You're safe."

I nodded, but I couldn't help scanning the woods anxiously. "Let's go far away," I urged. "Far from the villages I know, far from demon wolves, far from my family and Faeries and sorcerers."

Caswell's chuckle vibrated through his chest. "We can try. But I have a feeling we'll have to endure visits from a certain Fae Princess and her sorcerer consort sometime in the future."

"I suppose I can survive that. As long as you and Everston never try switching places again."

Caswell frowned at me. "That isn't funny, Songbird."

"Sorry." I winced. "Even if you did, I wouldn't be fooled."

"No?"

"No. I don't think you sound like Everston at all. He's all smooth and sly and well-spoken, and you're still gruff and growly. Except when you sing."

He scoffed. "I can be smooth and well-spoken. I'm a prince. Or at least, I was raised as one. I'm the prince of nothing, now."

I rose in my seat a little so I could kiss his cheek. "Prince of my heart."

A grunt was my only answer, but a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth, and his cheeks flushed.

"Besides, a girl doesn't always want the prince," I said, leaning my head on his shoulder. "Sometimes, she needs the beast."

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